

Chapter 1: March 15, 1982, Surrey

Happy damn birthday to me.

23 years old and nothing left to live for.

A passerby dropped a coin at his feet, apparently mistaking him for a homeless person. He was about to call after her, but thought better of it.

What the hell. 50p is 50p.

He picked up the coin and pocketed it.

This time last year, I had friends. I had what amounted to a family. I had work – it was dangerous, sure, but what isn't? I had a purpose in life.

And then, in the space of two days – gone. All of it. Three people I loved dead. Another one a traitor and locked up forever. And the last one hidden away where no one will find him.

No one including me.

He stared up through the leafless branches of the tree at the overcast sky.

Why am I even bothering anymore?

Tomorrow, I'll call the local authorities just before sunset and report a rabid animal on my property. Then I'll leave the door open.

End of problem.

End of everything.

This was definitely not one of Remus Lupin's better days.

But fate, as it so often does, was about to play a trick on him...

Having made a decision, he felt a little better. He sat up and looked around. Two tiny children in hooded coats chased one another

around the nearby swing set, giggling. A young woman sat on a bench nearby, reading.

They're so little. They can't be more than two. Probably not even that.

Harry's age.

His heart clenched painfully. No one would tell him where the boy was. The official story was that it would be better for everyone if Harry grew up fostered by Muggles, without contact with the wizarding world, without knowing that he was a celebrity and a hero. But Remus knew better.

They're afraid of me. They're afraid I might try to take him, and then lose control one night and bite him or even kill him. And the worst of it is, they're right on both counts. I'd take him in a heartbeat. And there's no guarantee he'd be safe with me.

He sighed as the shrieking from the playground rose in volume. No, I'd better just leave well enough alone. I'm sure he's happy where he is.

Wherever that may be.

"Neenie, no!" shouted the young woman at one of the children. There was no telling which, since both their faces were hidden by their hoods. "No pushing! Play nice with Harry!"

Remus sat up straight, every nerve alert. Oh my God.

Then he forced himself to calm down. No. It can't be. It has to be a coincidence. It's not that uncommon a name...

But it had got him thinking, and he couldn't seem to stop.

Lily had a sister, a Muggle sister. Petunia, I think. It's just possible he's with her. Lily's sacrifice would have left blood magic traces. If anyone could bring them to full strength, it would be Dumbledore. Which would make his aunt's home the safest place for him.

Possibly. I just wish I felt better about Lily's sister. If I remember correctly, she didn't think much of magic. Or of Lily.

But she wouldn't harm a child because of that. Would she?

I have to find out where she lives. If she doesn't have Harry, maybe she knows where he is... I think she might even live somewhere in Surrey, that's a start at least...

One of the children pushed the other one down. The fallen one started to cry.

"Oh, it's ok, sweetheart," cooed the young woman, hurrying to the child's side. "Don't cry, Greeneyes, it's just a little bump, right?"

Green eyes? Oh God...

Remus was on his feet without knowing it as the young woman gently pulled down the child's hood, exposing black, tousled hair and bright green eyes in a tear-streaked face.

James' face. And Lily's eyes.

He was running toward the child, unable to stop himself, knowing he must look completely mad, and not caring at all...

"Mooney!" the little boy squealed. His face lit up, and he lifted his arms in a "pick-me-up" gesture. Remus snatched him up and held him close, reveling in the feel of trusting arms around his neck, in the scent of the boy's hair and skin, in having the last person in the world he cared for close to his heart once more.

And I'll never let him go again...

He suddenly realized that the young woman was staring at him. Of course she's staring, she's probably Harry's foster mother or his aunt or something and she wants to know who you are and what the hell you think you're doing!

"I'm so sorry," he began, turning to her with Harry squirming happily in his arms. "I was a friend of Harry's father in school, I haven't seen him in a while..."

"I married you last night," she whispered.

"What?"

Her eyes went very round. "Oh my Lord. Oh my Lord, I did not just say that out loud. I did not. I did not. I did, didn't I."

"Yes, you did."

"Oh my Lord. I'm so sorry. What a way to start a conversation. Please, can we start over?"

"I'd love to," Remus said, looking more closely at her. She had quite a lot of curly brown hair, as did the little girl holding onto her pant leg and regarding him solemnly, though the effect was a little spoiled by the thumb in her mouth. The girl was adorable, he decided, and the woman rather lovely, in a bookish sort of way...

"I had a dream about you last night," the woman said, getting herself under control. "Even though, as far as I know, we have never met in the flesh. Am I right?"

"I think I would remember it if I had met you before, Miss..."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Please, call me Danger. It's my nickname, I answer to it faster than anything else."

"Well, if we're on nicknames, please, call me Moony." He transferred Harry to his left arm and shook hands.

"Is that what Harry said, then? I was wondering." Danger gave a lopsided smile and bent down to the little girl. "Neenie, this is Mr. Moony." She straightened up. "My sister, Neenie."

"Hello, Neenie," Remus said, smiling at her. Neenie gave a tiny wave with the hand that wasn't partially in her mouth. "Your sister?"

"I know, it's a big age difference, everyone thinks she's mine, but no, definitely my sister."

"So how do you know Harry?" Remus asked, sitting down with the child in question snuggling down on his lap.

"He lives up the street from us a little ways with his aunt and uncle. You said you were a friend of his father's?"

"Yes."

"May I ask, then?"

"Ask what happened to his parents?"

"Yes."

Remus took a deep breath, feeling the weight of Harry against his ribs. All the nightmarish images of the last six months flooded through his head, starting with the moment he had heard the news, and not from anyone he knew, anyone in the Order, no, just some random witch on the street, who had shouted it out to him when she saw him coming...

"They were murdered," he said. "Betrayed by a friend and killed by a lunatic."

"And his mother threw herself in front of him, to save him," Danger murmured as if to herself. "A flash of green light and a rushing sound like death on invisible wings..."

Remus stared at her. "How do you know that?" he demanded.

She met his eyes openly, and Remus saw something he'd never seen before – pain, grief, loss, all there, and all equal to his own.

"I dreamed it," she said softly. "I dreamed it all. You, and him, and this. Please, tell me something, and tell me the truth."

"If I can, I will."

"Is magic real? Because I dreamed of magic when I dreamed of you, and you're real, and here in front of me. So please tell me."

Harry squirmed. "Down, Mooey," he requested. Remus let him slide to the ground, still looking at Danger. Should I tell her? It's against the law, but she seems to know already...

"Yes," he said finally. She deserves the truth, if only for the pain in her face.

"Thank God," Danger breathed. "There was no other explanation."

"For what?"

Her eyes closed for a moment. "I was at school. I went to get Neenie from day care, then I went home. And there were my parents, lying in the living room, dead. They had these expressions on their faces..." She broke off. "I can't describe it."

"Pain," Remus said, thinking of the Longbottoms. "As if they died in pain."

"Yes." Danger's voice choked. "They never did anything wrong. Why them? Why?"

"The Dark Ones lost their leader just half a year ago," Remus said quietly. "You saw it in your dreams. They're trying frantically to stay out of prison, but some of them can't control themselves. Please believe me when I say that I wish I could have stopped them."

"I believe you," Danger said with her face in her hands. "And thank you." She squared her shoulders, took a deep breath, and went on. "So, after that, I got custody of Neenie, and I got a job, and life went on. My parents were both professionals, they were fairly well off, so we have a little saved up to help eke out my salary. But then I started dreaming. Pictures, words, and finally, last night, a story."

"Yes, you said a wedding?"

Danger smiled wanly. "Said more than that, didn't I? Yes, it was a wedding. I was the bride, and I realized I had no idea who any of the people were. Except my maid of honor, that was Aletha, my best friend when I was little. I haven't seen her in years, I wonder how she's doing... anyway, I got to the altar, I looked at the groom – and it was you. And please don't take this wrong, but if you kiss in real life like you did in the dream... damn."

"Thank you," Remus said. "I'm flattered. I think."

"Oh, it's a compliment, trust me," Danger said. "And I was so happy to see you that I forgot I didn't know anything about you – and suddenly I did know all about you. Everything."

"Everything?" As in, everything?

"Yes. Everything. Like how you have a hard time getting a job, because you have to be, shall we say, 'away' for a couple days every month, and everyone in the magical world would know why and be afraid, and no one in the rest of the world will put up with it, even if they don't know why."

Remus shook his head slowly, bemused. "You know what I am, and all about me, and you're still sitting here beside me?"

"Not everyone's a bigot," said Danger. "And besides, Harry likes you. I trust that kid's judgment."

"He liked Sirius, too," Remus said quietly. "It was Peter he wouldn't go near. He may not be the best judge of character."

"I'm sorry?"

"A couple of men I knew."

"Friends of yours?"

"At one time." Remus hoped she would be able to tell from his tone that he really didn't want to talk about this.

Danger was silent for a moment. "Do you believe me?" she finally asked. "About the dreams?"

"I don't know. You could have found out what you know somewhere else, I guess. Though it seems unlikely. Let's say I remain unconvinced at the moment."

"I think I can convince you."

"How?"

"Ask me something. Something you think no one would know."

"Something I think no one would know." Remus thought for a moment. All right, classic identification question. "What's my middle name?"

"John," Danger said quickly. "Remus John Lupin."

Remus stared at her for a moment. And I never told her any of that... just my nickname, that's all...

"Mine's Gertrude," Danger said quietly. "Gertrude Kelly Granger. Convinced now?"

"Yes," Remus said slowly. "Yes, I think I am."

"Would you like to come over for some tea, then?"

"Come over?"

"To my house. It's not far. And there are a few things I want to tell you. About the dreams. Things I think you need to know."

"If you're not busy..."

"I have the day off at work, so my only job is watching Harry until his aunt and uncle get back. And he's a great kid, so no, I'm not busy. It's just a few streets this way..."

The little house looked even more inviting when the skies opened as they had been threatening to do all day, and Remus was obliged to stay “at least until it stops raining.” Danger – Remus found himself unable to think of her as Gertrude – changed Harry’s nappy, then turned on the TV for the children, and put the kettle on to boil.

“The dreams are always similar, if not exactly the same,” she said without preamble, sitting down at the kitchen table. “Cacophony, madness. Blurs of color and sound. But I can get bits and pieces here and there. Lots of orange, but always associated with the word red. That confuses me a lot. When is orange red?”

Remus was taking notes on a pad he’d noticed on her desk. When is orange red?

“Along with the orange, or the red, or whatever, flashes of black and flashes of brown. And then it’s as if someone shouts a couplet in my ear.

“Black to red and red to brown

“Shall truly bring the darkness down.

“But I don’t know what it means,” she finished in frustration, lightly pounding the table. “Then I start getting actual pictures. Four boys. One of them is you. Then two with dark hair – one of those looks like Harry – and one kind of mousy-looking one.”

“My best friends at school,” Remus said. “We called ourselves the Marauders. The boy who looks like Harry is his father, James, the other dark one is Sirius Black, and the mousy boy is Peter Pettigrew.”

“Thank you,” Danger said in relief. “Having names makes everything easier. I see James, then, with a red-haired girl, flashes of dates, a wedding, a baby – Harry – and you and Black and Pettigrew around them, doing the things friends do. And then it all goes awful.” She shuddered. “One of you goes over to the Dark. To some horrid scary guy who looks like a snake gone wrong.”

“Sirius,” Remus said bitterly.

“No. Pettigrew.”

“What?” Remus jerked his head up from his notes to stare at her.

“That’s what I see,” Danger said. “It’s definitely Pettigrew talking with the nasty one. Pettigrew telling him where to find them. Pettigrew turning into a rat. Can he do that?”

He almost didn’t want to believe her, but her last comment clinched it. No one besides the Marauders had known about that.

And I’m the last Marauder.

About that, at least, she had to be telling the truth.

And if she’s telling the truth about that, what about the rest?

“Yes. He can.”

“He did it the day everyone thinks he died,” Danger said, her eyes almost closed. “I always see it in slow motion. He shouts something at Black, he pulls out this little stick behind his back,” she shuddered, “cuts off his own finger with it – I don’t know how, or why – ”

“A finger was the most they ever found of him,” Remus said in a deadly quiet voice. Too much was making sense all of a sudden.

“And then the street behind him just explodes, and he shrinks down to rat size and shape and runs away while the smoke is clearing. And Black looks at the place where he was, and he starts laughing. And then I drift into a kind of foggy place, and I hear a poem, repeated over and over again until I wake up with it drumming in my head.”

She clutched her hair melodramatically, then smiled apologetically. “I always thought that was just an expression, until I started dreaming like this. I finally wrote it down, and then it left me alone. I think you should see it.”

"I think I should too," Remus said grimly. Several loose parts of his world were starting to fall into place. Specifically, the "Sirius would never betray Lily and James" part, and the "Peter doesn't strike me as the martyr type" part.

"Here it is," Danger said, handing him a sheet of paper, half-covered with lines of neat handwriting. "I did a clean copy once I was sure I had it right."

Black to red and red to brown

Shall truly bring the darkness down.

Find the red and find the rat

Whose cunning plot did catch no cat.

Trust thy heart and try the grim,

And truth shall bring new life to him.

The wolf that runs in brightest dark

Of fear in danger strikes no spark,

For she is maid of warrior soul,

And by her touch his mind is whole.

When they who saved the savior twine

The freshest blood with founders' line,

Then has the age of hope begun,

And peace comes to the man who won.

"That couplet from before, that's repeated in here," Remus said as he scanned the lines.

Danger nodded. "I know. It must be important somehow."

"But we don't understand it at the moment, so let's look at the first quatrain, after the couplet."

"Sounds good."

The somewhat unlikely pair bent over their work.

(If you read, please review! I love getting reviews! And reviews encourage me to update sooner!)

Chapter 2: Interpretations

Remus read the lines slowly to himself, impressing them carefully on his memory.

Find the red and find the rat

Whose cunning plot did catch no cat.

Trust thy heart and try the grim,

And truth shall bring new life to him.

The teakettle whistled. Danger jumped up to tend to it. "Anything?" she asked as she lifted the kettle carefully off the heat and poured the steaming water into the pot.

"Not yet."

"Trust thy heart and try the grim..." The grim what? That doesn't make any sense, grim's not a noun, it's an adjective... unless...

Unless it's a proper noun.

"I think I have something."

"So tell." Danger handed him a mug. "Do you take sugar, or milk or anything?"

"Sugar if you have it. Have you ever heard of a Grim?"

"A Grim, as in a thing?" Danger had her head in the pantry. "Vaguely. Some kind of spirit, like a big black dog, I think. Isn't it supposed to be bad luck?"

"Yes. Another name for it is a Padfoot."

"Padfoot?" Danger sat back down, placing the sugar bowl on the table. "That sounds familiar. From the dreams. It was one of your nicknames. For the boy who could turn into the dog. For Sirius."

Comprehension dawned on her face, and she planted her finger on the word in the poem. "This means him, doesn't it?"

"It may well. The rest of the line is phrased as a command. Trust thy heart and try the Grim."

Danger blew on her tea. "Trust your feelings, Luke," she quoted. "Or rather, Moony. What does your heart tell you?"

"That Sirius would never have been a traitor," Remus said bitterly. "That I was a fool not to question, not to ask. They just threw him into Azkaban, he never even had a trial – ah!"

Danger jumped. "What?"

"Try the Grim. Try him, as in, give him a trial. The kind he never had."

"What kind of laws do you people have?" Danger asked, shaking her head.

Remus groaned. "The evidence was overwhelming against him. And we were still in the middle of a brutal war, with measures taken everywhere that shouldn't have been. So the man in charge of the case decided he'd expedite things, and I was too wrapped up in my own grief to notice, or care..."

"You can't blame yourself," Danger said quietly, putting her hand on top of his. "What matters now is righting the wrong, not assigning blame for it. There's still hope, isn't there? Look at the next line. And truth shall bring new life to him. If we can bring the truth out in the open, wouldn't he be released?"

"The problem is, there's no evidence that he didn't kill all those people, and every indication that he did. And all the evidence points to him being the betrayer." How could I have forgotten? Dream or no dream, it can't have been anyone but him... "He was the only one who could have betrayed Lily and James."

"Why the only one? Isn't everyone who knew where they were suspect?"

“Sirius was the only one who knew. Or rather, the only one who could tell other people. They were under a spell called the Fidelius Charm. Sirius was the key to that spell – ”

“The Secret-Keeper,” Danger interrupted.

“Yes. How do – of course, you dreamed it.”

“Yes, I dreamed the Secret-Keeper,” Danger said, her eyes half-lidded and her voice falling into a monotone. “I dreamed the Secret-Keeper and the Dark Lord. They were alone together. They spoke.”

Her voice changed, and Remus bit back an exclamation. She sounded exactly like Peter, like Peter at his whiniest.

“My Lord, it has happened – the Potters have made me their Secret-Keeper...”

“Well done, Wormtail,” said a strangely high, cold voice through Danger’s mouth. “You had no trouble convincing the cur it was his own idea to switch you, then?”

“None, my Lord. He sees me as weak and foolish, he would never believe such a clever idea was mine...”

“You are weak and foolish, Wormtail,” said the cold voice in tones of amusement. “But not as foolish as your former friends, who continue to hold out vain hopes of my defeat. You will be rewarded for this, I promise you...”

Danger’s eyes closed entirely, then shot open as she gasped for breath. “What was that?” she coughed.

“You looked as if you were in a trance,” Remus said quietly as everything fell into place in his mind. “And you told me exactly what I needed to know.”

“Are you all right?” Danger asked, getting her breathing under control.

“Just angry.” His hand tightened around the mug, ignoring the heat of the liquid inside. “Very angry. And perhaps a little bitter.”

“Why?”

“They changed Secret-Keepers. They used Peter instead of Sirius. And I didn’t know. They didn’t tell me. There’s only one reason they wouldn’t have told me.”

“They thought it was you,” Danger whispered. “Oh God, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault...”

“I know, I’m just... damn, why did I ever have to get mixed up in this?” Danger buried her head in her arms. “I’m sorry I ever got involved,” she said muffledly. “I’m sorry for everything.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” Remus felt an insane urge to pull her into his arms, but settled for resting his hand on her arm. “You’re telling me the truth. I need to hear it. An innocent man has been wronged, and there’s a rat somewhere out there who wants Harry dead. Now that I know, I can do something about it.”

Danger sniffled. “We,” she said.

“I’m sorry?”

“We can do something about it.” She raised her head. Her face, though tear-splotched, was filled with determination. “I may never have met you before today, I may not have wanted to get involved, but now that I am involved, I’m staying that way, so don’t think you’re leaving me behind!”

“I would never leave you behind,” Remus said, intending it to sound humorous. A mild feeling of shock spread over him as he realized the depth of feeling in the words, and the depth of his feelings for this woman he had only met a short time ago...

A two-part chorus of wails arose from the other room, and the attention of both adults was diverted.

Harry was hungry and Neenie was wet, as it turned out, so Danger attended to her sister's problem while Remus slid Harry into one of the two battered high chairs that sat in the kitchen. "What should I give him?" he called.

"There's dry cereal in the pantry, he can have some of that," Danger answered.

Remus poured some of the cereal onto the high chair tray, and Harry grabbed for it with a gleeful squeal. He stuffed a fistful in his mouth and gave one of his signature grins, and Remus felt his heart melt. Where do children learn how to do this? Is there some kind of secret Cuteness Correspondence Course they all take?

"I'd suggest setting up over here," Danger said, carrying Neenie into the kitchen and indicating a corner fairly far from the table. "You'll see why."

Remus pulled Harry's high chair across the kitchen and parked it next to Neenie's. As soon as Neenie got her serving of cereal, she scooped up a handful and pelted Harry with it. Harry responded in kind, both of them giggling madly, and soon there was more cereal on the floor than anywhere else. "I can always sweep later, and it keeps them happy," Danger said. "We just have to reload them every so often. Now where were we?"

"We have the last two lines of this stanza figured out. Sirius is innocent, which would have been shown if he'd ever had a trial, and if we can prove the truth somehow, we can free him." But something niggled at Remus. "...truth will bring new life to him." Truth, and Sirius...

"The truth and the star, what a combination," he murmured.

"What?"

"Something Sirius' girlfriend used to say about them. Because he was named after a star, and her name means 'truth.'"

“What’s her name?”

“Aletha. Aletha Freeman. I haven’t seen her since last July...” He stopped, realizing Danger had made a sound resembling a stifled squeal. He looked over at her. She had her hand pressed to her mouth as if she were about to be ill.

“What’s wrong?”

“You know Aletha Freeman?”

“We were in school together,” Remus said. “She was a year below me. Why, do you know her?”

“She was my best friend when I was little,” Danger said, looking shaken. “She was in my dream...” She blushed. “...about the wedding. But I haven’t seen her since we were kids. Are you telling me she’s a – a wizardess?”

“A witch,” Remus corrected. “If it’s the same Aletha Freeman. Can you describe her?”

“I have a picture,” Danger said. “Of the two of us, before she went away. I’ll get it.” She hurried up the stairs. Remus took the opportunity to put more cereal on the children’s trays. Harry yelled happily and pounded one or two pieces to dust before throwing another handful at Neenie as Danger arrived breathlessly with a framed photograph in her hands.

“That’s her,” Remus said, looking at the grinning, dark-skinned girl with the cap of black frizzy hair, arm around the waist of a younger version of Danger, both of them frozen in time in the Muggle picture. “That’s Letha.”

Danger shook her head. “This is way too weird for me. My best friend when I was little dated your best friend from school, I baby-sit your other best friend’s kid, and now we just happen to meet in the park?”

“It is strange,” Remus said, looking again at the picture. “But I’m unbelievably glad that it happened. If it hadn’t...” He stopped. No

need to tell her everything. "I would have spent the day alone and depressed," he finished. "Like I've spent most of the past six months. And it's my birthday, which doesn't help matters any."

"Happy birthday, then," Danger said, smiling at him. "I'm glad I could help."

"So 'truth' in the poem may mean Aletha," Remus said, pulling himself back to the original subject. "If it does, she may be important in whatever it is we're supposed to do. We should get in touch with her. I can do that. Tomorrow – no, not tomorrow, or the day after. The day after that."

"Why not tomorrow?"

Remus flinched, inwardly. She already knows, he reminded himself, and she doesn't care. But old habits died hard. And they really shouldn't die at all, I need them for the rest of the world, the kind with normal attitudes about lycanthropy... "Tomorrow night is the full moon, and I'm not much good for a day before or after."

"Of course," Danger said, getting up to give Harry some more cereal. "I can understand that. So in three days, we'll get a hold of Aletha and see how she reacts to this. What can we do in the meantime?"

"Keep working on the poem," Remus said. "If we can get all this from just two lines, what secrets does the rest of it hold?"

Working from the identification of Sirius as the Grim, they were able to identify the rat of the first line as Pettigrew fairly easily. "Find the rat/ whose cunning plot did catch no cat," Danger chanted. "It caught no cat because it caught a dog, a Grim. It must be Pettigrew."

Remus ran his finger along the first line of the quatrain. "This first part is some kind of clue about where to find him. Find the red and find the rat. Red again. Could this be the same red as in the couplet, the red that's really orange?"

“Could be. That line comes right after the couplet, so it makes sense. All right, thinking time. What’s black, brown, and red but really orange?”

“It sounds like a joke,” Remus said. “A very bad joke.”

Danger grinned. “Like, what’s black and white and red all over?”

Remus sighed. “That is so old.”

“How old is it?” Danger asked in a sing-song tone.

“It’s so old that even wizards know it.”

“Bravo!” She applauded him. “You know, I’ve never had anyone actually give me a comeback on that line before?”

“They were probably slain by your rapier wit,” Remus said, smiling in spite of himself. He had never met anyone who intrigued him as Danger did.

I’ve never met anyone even remotely like Danger!

The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” said Danger, jumping up. “It is my house, after all.”

Remus watched her go down the hall and open the door onto a wet but no longer raining day. “Hello, Mrs. Dursley, how was your trip?”

“Not too bad, thank you,” said the woman at the door, who was blonde and rather thin. “I just wanted to let you know we were back, so you can send him along any time you get tired of him.” Her tone suggested she expected this to happen sooner rather than later.

Does she mean Harry? She must be his aunt...

Good Lord, she doesn’t look a thing like Lily.

No, I take that back. There’s a slight resemblance. Very slight.

And she doesn't seem to care for Harry much...

"Thank you, I'll do that. He's quite happy at the moment, though, so it may not be for a while."

"That's just fine," the woman said in a more cheerful tone. "Thank you again for watching him, it's such a nuisance for Vernon to have these all-day conferences, but they need his advice desperately..." Remus had the impression she was lingering on the doorstep to see if she could get a look inside the house, as if she was simply dying to know everything that went on inside.

Well, if I can see her, she can see me... And just as he realized that, she did see him, and her eyes widened quite a bit. "Well, I'll be going, then, Dudders will want his tea," she said. "I'll see you later, dear, thank you again..."

"Horrible woman," Danger hissed after the door was safely shut. "You disgusting old gossip-monger. May you fall down the stairs and bite your tongue out."

"Harry's aunt?"

"The one and only. She saw you, didn't she? I didn't have time to warn you to stay out of sight... well, too late now... damn."

"What's wrong?"

"By tonight, every woman on this block will know that I had a strange man in my house. They'll have us dating by tomorrow and sleeping together the day after that."

Remus couldn't resist. "Sounds like a good schedule to me."

Danger's eyes went very wide. "Why... you... you..."

He grinned at her.

“You MAN!” she shouted, laughing, grabbing a handful of cereal out of the box on the counter and throwing it at him. He dodged it, but Neenie and Harry immediately decided he was a fair target for them as well, and before long there was cereal flying everywhere in the kitchen.

The battle ended when Neenie got hit in the eye by a bad throw of Remus’ and began to cry. Harry started crying in sympathy, so both children had to be cuddled and comforted, and since Neenie didn’t know Remus, he got to hold Harry again.

It was bliss.

After Harry had finished sniffing, he looked up at Remus. “Mooney, where Pa-foot?”

It was a natural question for the boy to ask – Remus and Sirius had seldom visited the Potters separately – but it caught Remus by surprise, and he had to sit down and get himself under control before he could answer. “Padfoot’s away on a trip, Harry. But I think he’ll come home soon. And then he can play with you.”

“Yay, p’ay wif Pa-foot!” Harry said, wiggling. “Where Mama and Dada?”

He would have to ask the hard one. Remus looked over at Danger and mutely appealed for help.

“Oh, Harry,” she said, sitting down next to them, with Neenie, on her lap, sucking her thumb again. “Your Mama and Dada had to go away.”

“Go ‘way like Pa-foot?”

“Well, yes and no. They did go away, but Padfoot is coming back. Your Mama and Dada aren’t going to come back. They’re watching over you from far away, and they love you very much, but they have to stay where they are.”

Harry considered this. "Mooney," he finally declared with true toddler logic, bumping his head against Remus' chest. "Dayger." He pointed to Danger. "Neenie." He indicated the girl. "An' Pa-foot come back soon."

"That's right," Remus said. "Harry, do you remember your Auntie Letha?"

Harry nodded, looking around expectantly.

"No, she's not here," Remus said, smiling at the boy's eagerness. "But she might come back soon too. Would you like that?"

"Yay!" Harry bounced up and down on Remus' knees. Remus laughed aloud at Harry's obvious delight in life.

"How he stays that happy I don't know," Danger said quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"I have to show you something, and I don't think you're going to like it."

(A/N: Just so you know, Aletha is pronounced "uh-LEE-thuh" (or at least that's how I'm pronouncing it), so Letha would be "LEE-thuh".

Next update may be a while, the INCREDIBLE MASSES OF HOMEWORK have hit... but I promise not to abandon this! Oh, and I know this may be obvious, but a special mention to the first person who can tell me Neenie's full name!)

Chapter 3: Castles in the Air

“Show me something?” Remus asked. “Something about Harry?”

Danger nodded. “Harry, come with me,” she said, and walked into the hall with Harry and Neenie each holding one hand. Remus followed them.

They stopped beside the stairs. “All the houses in this suburb are built alike,” Danger said. “So this house is practically identical to the one where Harry lives. Watch.”

She unlatched the door of the floor-level hallway cupboard.

Harry pulled away from her. “No! No cubbud! No cubbud! NO!” He ran to Remus and hid behind him. “NO CUBBUD! NO NO NO!”

Danger closed the door quickly as Remus knelt down to embrace the stiff and shaking little boy. Neenie was clutching Danger’s pants again; her mouth was quivering around the ever-present thumb.

Remus stroked Harry’s hair, trying to get him to calm down, though he was tense himself with the child’s obvious fear. “What was that about?”

“He sleeps in the cupboard under the stairs at home.” Danger’s eyes were narrowed, her nostrils flared, her lips tight. “If you can call it a home. And they stick him in there whenever they don’t want to be bothered with him.”

A wave of anger swept over Remus, and he tightened his arms around Harry, who was still shivering, his face buried in Remus’ shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Danger said soothingly, rubbing the little boy’s back. “No cupboard. Not with me. Never with me.”

“Mooey?” Harry whimpered.

“Tell him no cupboard,” Danger whispered. “He wants to know if you’re going to put him in there. Tell him no.”

“No cupboard, Harry,” Remus said firmly. “No cupboard with me. Ever.”

Harry relaxed all at once and molded himself against Remus’ side, head resting on his shoulder.

“What kind of person would do that to a child?” Remus demanded, standing up with Harry in his arms.

“The kind of person like Vernon and Petunia Dursley,” Danger said with a growl in her voice, leading the way back to the kitchen. “And their son, Dudley. He’s not much older than Harry, but he’s huge – fattest kid I’ve seen in a long while – and mean to the core. He pulls Neenie’s hair whenever he can catch her. I don’t like to think what he probably does to Harry.”

“Dudley mean,” volunteered Neenie, removing her thumb from her mouth.

“Well, another party heard from,” Remus said, smiling at the little girl. “You know, I think that’s the first time I’ve heard you talk?”

Neenie smiled back at him, then ducked behind Danger’s chair in a sudden shy fit.

“She’s darling,” Remus said. “You’re very lucky.”

“Yeah, well, she likes you,” Danger said. “With most people, she won’t even come out from behind me until she’s known them for about a week. Talking usually takes at least two.”

“You must not get many baby-sitters.”

Danger shrugged. “No need for them – there’s nowhere I go that Neenie can’t come, except work, and she likes the people at her day care, she’s known them since she was tiny. So anyway, now you

know as much as I do about Harry. I baby-sit him every day I can get off work – ”

“Are you saying you’ve been missing work to take care of Harry?” Remus asked.

“After I figured out why he was throwing a screaming fit every time I went to get the Christmas decorations, yes. I wasn’t about to let a sweet little boy like him get mistreated without doing something about it. I tried calling Social Services, but they’re backed up for months, and unless he’s in immediate danger, they don’t want to hear about it. So at the moment I’m part-time clerk, part-time babysitter. The Dursleys pay pretty well, so it’s not really a financial problem...” She stopped, noticing how Remus was looking at her. “What is it?”

“What is it?” You’re keeping this little boy safe from things his own relatives are doing to him, and you’re sacrificing to do it – a part-time job, even with baby-sitting thrown in, can’t possibly support you and your sister the way you deserve.

You’re a good person.

That’s what it is.

And I wish I could tell you that.

“I was just thinking how ironic it is that you’re practically a stranger, but you’re helping Harry, and his relatives, the people who should be taking care of him, are actually the problem.”

“Stuff happens all over,” Danger said, waving her hand dismissively. “I’m just not one to sit around and let it happen. Never have been.”

“Thank you,” Remus said earnestly. “For everything.”

“Ah, you’re welcome,” Danger mumbled, blushing. “Don’t look now, but I think he’s gone to sleep...”

Even as she said it, Remus felt Harry grow heavier on his shoulder, in the inexplicable way of sleeping babies. He shifted the boy gently down into his arms. "Should I put him on the couch?"

"No, he might roll off. I'll get a blanket for the floor."

The telephone rang. "Hold that thought," Danger said, reaching for it. "Hello? Yes... oh, yes, of course... right away. You're welcome." She hung up. "His aunt says she wants him home," she said sarcastically. "The truth is she thinks she's paid me enough for today. It costs nothing to stick him in a cupboard, after all."

"A cupboard." Remus looked down at Harry, whose expression and general demeanor while asleep could only be accurately described as angelic, and felt again the urge to hold the child tight and never let him go. "That has to stop. It's wrong."

"You going to stop it?" Danger asked lightly.

"If I have to, yes."

"Not to play devil's advocate, but how?"

"They're adults, aren't they? They'll listen to reason..." He stopped, seeing Danger shaking her head.

"If they were reasonable, would they be making a not-even-two-year-old sleep in a cupboard? They think they're God's greatest gift to the world, and they won't listen to anyone. Trust me. I know."

"I'd take him myself if I thought it would solve anything," Remus said, rocking Harry soothingly as the boy came half-awake with a little wail.

Danger smiled mischievously. "Take him, as in just take him? Walk in one day, pick him up, and walk out?"

"Or one night," Remus said, entering into the spirit of the game. "Pick the lock on their front door, sneak in and steal him, out again and no one the wiser. We could be miles away by morning, if we had some place safe to go. A house, and a job, somewhere far from here..." He

smiled sadly, shaking his head. "Castles in the air. Here, you should take him home."

Danger accepted Harry. "Stay with Neenie while I take him over?" she asked. "I'll only be a minute."

"Certainly." Remus saw her to the door, since Harry was a two-arm package, especially asleep and limp. As he closed it behind her, he became aware of a tugging at his pant leg. He looked down. "Yes, and what can I do for you?" he asked Neenie gravely.

"Up," the little girl said matter-of-factly, holding her arms out. Remus scooped her up, and she squirmed around until she was sitting on his hip and looking him in the face. "Moo-nee nice," she said with a smile, apparently proud of herself for pronouncing both syllables. "I s'leep now." And without further ado, she plopped her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

"Well, I guess this is my day to be a pillow," Remus said bemusedly. He headed for the living room, where he could at least be a pillow sitting down.

It's been an incredible day. I'm tired myself.

He yawned as he sat down on the couch. Putting my feet up would feel nice. Lying down would feel even nicer.

He shifted Neenie's weight to his chest. I'll just close my eyes for a moment. I won't go to sleep...

He was in water, cold water, and it was deep. Too deep. He couldn't stay afloat, he was starting to sink –

A hand caught his and pulled his arm over a piece of wood, which he clung to and caught his breath. He looked around at his savior – it was a woman, a brown-haired woman, who looked familiar –

Danger. That's her name. I met her today, she takes care of Harry. And sure enough, the woman, who was holding on to the other side of what he could now see was a tiny raft, had two children clinging to her back, and one of them was Harry. The other was her sister – oh,

what's her name, Neenie. Both looked tired, as if they were about to lose their grip and fall into the water.

He held out his hand, wordlessly offering to take one of the children from her. Danger nodded, and he hooked his elbow around a projection on the raft, then reached over and snagged Harry. There was a heart-stopping moment when he thought he was going to drop the child, but then Harry grabbed onto him and held on tight.

Why don't we put them on this thing? It might not hold us, but it will hold them. He lifted Harry from the water and put him on the raft, and it rocked slightly but stayed upright. Danger quickly set Neenie beside Harry, and the children huddled together.

Remus looked down the river and saw the silhouetted figure of a woman, desperately trying to hold on to something which seemed to be breaking apart under her hands. As they passed her, he reached out and caught her hand, pulling it to their raft. She caught on and held tight, and as they came into a slightly more lit area, he saw her face – it was Aletha Freeman, looking as determined as she ever had chasing down a Bludger.

We're all in this together, it would seem...

And just as he thought that, something brushed his leg. Something soft. A hand, which closed weakly around his ankle before losing its grip...

Someone's down there. I have to help them.

He took a deep breath and dived.

The water was cold on his face, and murky. He couldn't see. He felt around where he thought the hand had been, and just as he was starting to need a breath, found it, limp and boneless-feeling. He grasped it firmly and swam for the surface.

As he had hoped, the women had been kicking against the current, holding the raft nearby, waiting for him. He pulled the person up

behind him, and somehow wasn't surprised to see that it was Sirius Black, looking exhausted and pale, and not breathing.

That's bad.

But before he could do anything about it, Sirius gasped and started coughing, and Remus hoisted him onto the raft and grabbed the edge again himself. Aletha loosed her grip enough to touch Sirius' face gently, and he opened his eyes after a moment to smile at her.

The raft speeded up. The water seemed to be getting warmer, and there was definitely more light. And – is this thing getting bigger?

A few more moments removed the question. The raft had indeed grown. It was large enough to take everyone. Remus helped the women climb aboard, then accepted their hands to pull him up.

Suddenly they passed from the darkness of the tunnel into light, the light of a sunny day. The tiredness Remus had been feeling seemed to drop away from him as he looked around at the green banks of the river, at the smiling faces of his friends. The raft felt like an oasis of peace, and as Harry climbed into his lap, Remus wished he could stay where he was forever...

Danger closed the door behind her, unable to shake the image in her mind of bright green eyes filled with unhappiness and a little voice saying "Dayger?" in a pleading tone.

He practically begged me not to leave. But what can I do? He belongs to them.

Another voice intruded on her thoughts. Remus' voice.

I'd take him myself... if we had some place safe to go. A house, and a job, somewhere far from here...

Danger's imagination took over. Just a little house, big enough for four. A man and a woman, a boy and a girl, making a new life together... and a job at a bookstore, or a library... oh, wouldn't that be wonderful? To work among all the wisdom and folly of the ages, neatly categorized and alphabetized...

She smiled wryly. Now who's building castles in the air? A new life together? For heaven's sake, Gertrude, you only met the man today, no matter what you dreamed! She only used her real name to herself when she was annoyed. And you know you'll never get Harry. Even if the Dursleys don't want him, he's theirs by right, and they never let go of anything, even if they want nothing more than to be rid of it.

But it would be good for Neenie to have a brother. She was awfully lonely before Harry came along. There's no little girls living around here, and most of the little boys are Dudley's type – big spoiled bullies...

Stop it now, her stern side ordered. You're wishing for the moon.

No, I'm wishing for...

Don't. Even. Think. It.

This inner argument brought her through the kitchen and into the living room, where she stopped short.

Moony, her irrepressible side finished anyway.

Remus Lupin was sleeping on her couch, with one arm protectively across little Hermione, asleep on his chest.

They look perfect together, she couldn't help thinking. He could be her father.

And she needs a father. I'm doing my best, but she's getting into the stubborn stage, and having someone else around to back me up would help with that.

She sat down wearily in a rocking chair, acknowledging reality. Having someone else around would help with everything. There are days I just want to give up and cry because there's always too much to do and never enough time or money. I know life's tough all over, but human beings weren't meant to go it alone, were we? I mean, there has to be a reason for this thing called love...

She blinked, startled by her own thoughts, and shook her head. Moving a bit fast, aren't we, young lady? Love's quite a big word. Why don't we try something like friendship first, and see where it goes from there...

After all, you don't know the man that well yet. No matter what Petunia Dursley and her network of spies say.

She sighed. He can joke all he wants, but my reputation's just gone down the tubes. The neighborhood busybodies will assume the worst, and the story will be everywhere by the day after tomorrow, and there's nothing I can do about it.

Maybe we should move...

But I can't abandon Harry. He's undernourished, in more ways than one – he's incredibly bright, but even the brightest children won't learn if they don't have opportunities, and when does he ever get them, stuck in that flipping cupboard? And they never hold him or hug him – I think they may actually hit him, he flinches sometimes when I lift my hand above my shoulder.

She twisted a pinch of her shirt in frustration. We're the only hope he has. Me, and Neenie, and now Remus...

I can't take that away from him, I just can't. Reputation or not, here we stay.

Unless, of course, we did something really crazy. Like actually stealing him and running for it.

Could we get away with it? Would having magic on our side help any? There would probably be magic people looking for him too, I gather he's important somehow... but if we hid from the magic types with not-magic methods, and the not-magic types with magic methods...

"Castles in the air again," she said aloud in frustration.

Remus came awake with a small jump, looking down in confusion at the tiny brown head on his chest.

"I'll take her," Danger said, lifting her sister gently enough that Neenie only fretted a moment before settling back into her nap into Danger's arms. "Be back in a moment."

She hurried upstairs to slip the little girl into her crib. When she returned, Remus was sitting at the kitchen table, looking rather embarrassed.

"I'm so sorry," he began. "You left me to watch her, and instead I fell asleep..."

"No apology necessary," Danger said sincerely. "I doubt she would have been able to move without waking you, and it was a charming tableau to walk in on. Don't worry about it."

Remus nodded stiffly. An uncomfortable silence ensued.

"I should go," Remus began, at the same moment that Danger blurted, "Would you like to stay for dinner?"

They hesitated, looking at each other almost shyly. Then Remus said musingly, "Well, I suppose I could..." as Danger quickly said, "But if you have somewhere else to be..."

The double coincidence was too much, and they both cracked up, laughing together with abandon and shattering the tension that had been building in the room.

"No, nowhere else to be," Remus said, still chuckling, a few moments later. "And I'm thoroughly sick of my own cooking. So if the offer is still open, I accept with pleasure."

"The pleasure's all mine." Danger smiled and felt her heart warm when he smiled back. "I love to cook. Do you have any preferences?"

"I enjoy pasta dishes," Remus said. "But really, anything will do."

“Have you ever had pasta with peanut butter sauce?”

“No, but it sounds interesting, and I’ll try anything once.”

“Bit dangerous, that, isn’t it?”

Remus shrugged. “No more so than life itself. I make exceptions for obviously stupid things, like teasing a hippogriff.”

“What is a hippogriff?”

Stories about wizarding life and magic in general filled the time it took to prepare dinner. Danger listened carefully, storing the details in her memory. You never know what might be useful.

“This is excellent,” Remus announced after tasting the pasta. “My compliments to the chef.”

“Thank you, kind sir.” Danger inclined her head in his direction.

“I haven’t had anything this good since I left Hogwarts.”

“That’s... your school?” Danger hazarded, hoping for another round of stories.

She wasn’t disappointed. By the time she handed the last of the dishes to Remus to dry, Danger knew more about the wizarding life of England than any Muggle (a word she found fascinating) who wasn’t related to a wizard or witch.

“You shouldn’t be telling me this, should you?” she asked. “You could get in trouble.”

“I could,” Remus replied. “But as you pointed out, you’re already involved. You’re practically raising The Boy Who Lived.” Another thing he’d explained was the cause of Harry’s fame, and the nickname it had earned him among the general wizarding public. “It makes sense for you to know. You may even have magic yourself.”

“Me?”

"You're what we call a true-dreamer. You see things in your dreams that really happened. Parts of them even sound predictive, foretelling the future. That's a magical gift as far as I know... but we can always check."

"How?"

Remus got up and went into the hall, returning with a carved stick about a foot long.

"Is that..."

"A genuine magic wand. Here, give it a try."

Danger accepted it gingerly and gave it a timid wave. Nothing happened.

"I'd prefer if you'd point it that way," Remus said firmly, directing her aim away from him.

"Fine," Danger snapped, jerking her hand away in annoyance.

A burst of golden sparks shot from the end of the wand and landed on the kitchen counter, where they fizzled and went out in a puddle of water from the dish drainer.

"Was that me?" Danger breathed.

"You're the one with the wand," Remus said, grinning at her.

Danger quickly handed it to him, still staring at the place where the sparks had been.

"Congratulations, Miss Granger," said Remus, pocketing his wand.
"You're a witch."

Danger sat down abruptly, luckily where the chair was instead of where it wasn't.

I'm a witch. I have magic.

But – that's impossible.

"How can I be? I mean, you told me how Hogwarts goes looking for children who have magic, and I never got a letter or anything, so how could I be magical now?"

"I don't know," Remus admitted. "But you are magical. No one can use a wand who isn't. I heard a theory once that some people have latent magic, magic that isn't active and can't be detected, so they go through their lives as Muggles. No one ever knows, unless they experience some kind of shock that brings out the magic in them."

"A shock? Like finding your parents dead in the living room?"

Remus winced. "That might well do it, yes."

Danger stared at the floor. "When I found my dad and mum, I screamed. I screamed so loud they heard me on the next block. And things broke. All the light bulbs, all our glass lampshades, even the glass in the windows shattered. Was that magic?"

"It must have been." Remus seemed about to make a movement toward her, but instead went to the desk in the corner, wrote something on a pad, and tore it off. "Here's my phone number. If you need anything, call me. Well, not tomorrow night, but any other time, call me."

Danger nodded, accepting the folded slip of paper. "Wait a second, I'll give you mine," she said. "In case there's something you need to tell me in a hurry."

Remus took the note she handed him and slid it into his pocket. "I really should go now," he said, looking outside, where it was full dark already.

Danger walked down the hall with him. "Thank you for staying to dinner."

“Thank you for having me. It was the best meal, and the best companionship, I’ve had in months.”

“Same here. The companionship, I mean.” Danger found her breath coming a little short as Remus smiled at her again.

“Well, good night, then,” he said, holding out his hand.

“Good night.” She shook it courteously.

Is it my imagination, or did he hold on a moment longer than he had to?

With a polite bow, Remus Lupin took his leave.

Danger leaned against the wall and caught her breath.

I am definitely attracted to that man.

Strongly attracted.

I think a cold shower is indicated.

Remus hurried through the dark streets to the place where he had parked his car, mind racing.

I need to get home. And start making plans. Harry’s being mistreated, Sirius is innocent... Aletha needs to know first of all, I can owl her tomorrow... should I even tell Dumbledore? I don’t have any solid proof...

But before I do any of that, I think I need a cold shower.

I am strongly attracted to that woman.

And that’s not good. For either of us.

(A/N: Hee hee, gotta love the plot twists...

Hugs to you all! Keep reading and reviewing, and I’ll keep writing!)

Chapter 4: Tamer

Dear Aletha,

I know we haven't corresponded in a while, and to be honest I don't really know what to say to you. The last time we saw each other, the world was a very different place for both of us. But I'd like to see you, to tell you a few things that I think may be important. I'm a bit ill right now, so I'll be stuck at home for a day or so, but any time after that I'm free. I'd appreciate an answer, even if it's "no".

Thanks,

Remus Lupin

Remus laid down his quill and considered the letter. I think it'll do.

It had better. It's my 14th draft.

He waved the letter in the air for a moment to dry the ink, folded it, and addressed it: Ms. Aletha Freeman. Then he went over to his fireplace. A quick "Incendio!" and a handful of Floo powder later, he knelt down on the blanket he'd folded on the bricks. "London post office," he said clearly, and put his head in the fire.

When the spinning subsided, he was looking at the interior of the Diagon Alley Post Office. One of the clerks, a small blonde witch, noticed him and hurried over. "Good morning, sir, what can I do for you today?"

"I have a letter I'd like to post," Remus said. "How much to rent an owl for one delivery?"

"Is this a local or an international delivery?"

"Local, definitely local." At least I hope so. Last I heard, she was living in London.

"That's fourteen Knuts, sir. Shall I charge your vault, or would you like to pay up front?"

"I'll pay now, thanks." Remus felt around in his pocket until he found a Sickle and tossed it into the fire. He counted silently. One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, three...

The Sickle clattered onto the floor of the post office. "I'll get right on that, sir," the clerk said, scooping it up. "Can I get your name and address, please?"

"Remus Lupin, number 17 Oxman Road, Cold Crossing, Surrey." Fifteen minutes from Little Whinging. That's all. Six months I was worried about Harry, and all that time he was just fifteen minutes away from me... no wonder Dumbledore would never tell me where he was.

The clerk recorded the information at her desk and returned to the fireplace with a handful of Knuts. "Your owl will be arriving in approximately half an hour, Mr. Lupin." She poured the coins into a funnel hanging by the side of the fire; they streamed through the connection and landed by Remus' side without hitting him in the face, for which he was decidedly grateful. "Thank you for using the Diagon Alley Post Office, and have a nice day."

"Thank you, ma'am." Remus pulled his head out of the fire, coughed once or twice, and scooped up the Knuts which littered his hearth.

Half an hour. Time enough for lunch.

As he fixed himself a sandwich, Remus' thoughts kept returning to Harry, and to the Grangers. He and Neenie seem to like each other, as much as two toddlers ever like anything. And he's obviously bonded strongly with Danger. She's probably like a mother to him, which is good – he needs one.

But he needs a father, too. So does Neenie. And they don't have anyone...

He halted that train of thought before it started pulling into improper stations.

I have absolutely no right to be thinking anything of the sort. I only met these people yesterday, no matter how charming or nice they are. No matter that the little girl, admittedly shy, likes me enough to fall asleep in my arms, and that I'm hopelessly attracted to her sister...

Well, I've admitted it. Might as well say it aloud, then...

Remus put down his sandwich and sighed. "All right. I am very much attracted to Danger."

Then he had to laugh at the other possible meanings of that statement.

So yes. I'm attracted to her. But it would never work. I'm a werewolf. Once a month I go into a killing frenzy where I want nothing more than to hurt human beings. What sane person would even think of putting a child, never mind two children, in a house with me?

Of course, what sane person would think of leaving a child in a house where he's locked in a cupboard by his supposed guardians?

I guess it all just goes to show one thing.

I'm not entirely sane.

But Sirius and James told me that for years...

A rapping on the window broke into his thoughts. Oh, the owl's here. Good.

He opened the window, and the owl flapped into the room, perching on the back of one of his kitchen chairs. Quickly, he opened his letter and added a PS:

It's about Harry. R.L.

"That should get her attention," he muttered to himself as he blew on the ink to dry it. Aletha had been one of the Potters' most frequent visitors, coming to talk with Lily and play with Harry at least once a week. A strong and practical woman, the first female Beater at

Hogwarts in 10 years, she would have loved to have children of her own, but Sirius had always been too interested in making trouble, at first for his superiors and then, as the war worsened, for Voldemort...

He was planning to ask her to marry him soon, I think. Sometime in November, and have a Christmas wedding...

God, this whole mess just keeps getting worse, the more I look at it. Lives ruined everywhere I turn. Lily and James, Sirius, Aletha, Harry, me... even Danger and Neenie had their lives shattered by Death Eaters.

He attached the letter to the owl's leg with a spare piece of string, and it took off.

But the hallmark of humanity is the ability to start over. What if we, all the survivors, could start over together? Make a home somewhere and rebuild our lives, helping one another?

Impossible, said his cynical side. You're dreaming.

But the idea had taken hold of his mind, and it refused to let go. It might be worth a shot. Maybe. Possibly.

It's a dream, all right, but doesn't everything start with a dream? Danger dreamed.

She was driving along roads she had never seen in waking life, driving as if she took this path every day, or every night, since it was nighttime. Neenie slept in her car seat in the back seat of the truck. They had to hurry, hurry, there wasn't much time...

A right, a quick left, and she was there. She parked the truck, noting the time before she turned it off – 10:13. Up the front steps of one of the houses she ran; the door opened to her hand, and she stepped inside and closed it behind her.

She had only a moment to look around before she heard a loud thumping, crashing noise, as if something was being thrown at a wall

over and over again. And the wall was starting to buckle from the strain...

No, I'm wrong. Not a wall, a door.

That door.

The door in question looked as if it should lead only to a closet, but there was obviously something in there. Something that wanted out.

And something that was about to get out. The door was cracking.

Three more hits ought to do it, Danger estimated, stepping off to one side.

Two more.

One.

Crash.

The door flew into splinters, and a long, gray, shaggy form erupted from the closet, landed on the floor of the hallway, and howled in triumph.

A wolf.

No, a werewolf.

Remus. It has to be.

The werewolf noticed Danger and snarled.

Danger noted from a distance that she really should be scared, but somehow she couldn't find the energy for fear. Her entire being was fixated on what she had to do –

The werewolf charged her, leaping up to bite her, and she dropped quickly to the floor. Its jump carried it over her head, and she reached

up and caught hold of one of its paws. Something like an electric shock passed through her, and –

She was sitting up in bed, gasping.

Quickly, she flipped the light on and looked at her clock. 9:49.

I have to go. Now.

She dressed faster than she had ever done, snatched Neenie and practically ran down the stairs, was unlocking her truck before her nearly hysterical mind caught up. What am I doing? Werewolves hate people, they try to kill them! There's no way I should be doing this!

As of two days ago, you didn't even know werewolves really existed, she told her doubting side, buckling Neenie into her car seat. So shut up.

The doubts grumbled but subsided.

Danger had no idea where Remus Lupin lived, except that it was in the general area nearby, but just as in her dream, the roads unfolded before her as if she had known the way from childhood. "Turn right here" or "sharp left coming up" floated into her mind precisely when they were needed. It was an eerie feeling.

I wonder if this is my magic, and I can find the way to anywhere I really need to go? That seems like not very much for magic to do, but maybe that's the way it is if you come to it late...

She parked the truck in front of the house she had seen just as the last little number on the dashboard clock turned from 2 to 3 and ran up the front steps, wondering idly if the door would open for her, and feeling no surprise when it did. She pulled it shut behind herself and locked it, taking a look around.

The house was small and a bit shabby, obviously lived-in. Motion on the mantelpiece caught her eye – a black-haired baby crawled into view within the frame of a photograph and rolled over, displaying a big smile on a very familiar face.

Harry. And a magic photo of him, no less. This has to be the right house.

On cue, the thumping from the closet began.

Danger discovered that when it was for real, she felt fear. Fear almost paralyzed her. She would have run away, except for one thing.

If I don't do something, he'll get out of the house and start hurting people, maybe even killing them. Then in the morning, when he realizes what he did, it's only a matter of whether he commits suicide before the authorities find him. He would never be able to live with himself.

And I can't live without him.

When there was time, Danger decided, she was going to do a complete mental check and make sure she wasn't turning into some simpering fainting romantic sissy.

The door crashed outwards.

I guess not, since a sissy would have fainted by now...

The werewolf rushed at her – she saw its hindquarters gather for the leap and bent her knees in a controlled fall – the gray body flew over her head, snarling down at her as it passed – her hand flew up and made contact, wrapping around one of the front paws – she felt the roughness of the paw pads, the slippery fur, the blunt claws –

The shock was much worse in real life than in the dream. She was only vaguely conscious of collapsing to the ground, the wolf slumped beside her, her hand still wrapped around its paw...

Remus came to full awareness with a start. Where am I?

The last thing he remembered was despair. He had locked the closet door at two minutes to moonrise and suddenly noticed that the grain in the wood seemed to have more vertical lines than it should. The

door was cracking. It probably wouldn't survive his usual onslaught of the night. And it was too late for him to do anything about it.

So I should be somewhere in the countryside, probably covered in blood from some innocent person I bit, or if I'm very lucky, still in the closet. Instead, I'm...

Wearing dress robes?

"You all right?" said a familiar voice from the other end of the small stone room where he sat. Sirius Black, flawlessly attired in dark red, was leaning against the wall. "You look like your dog just died."

"What's going on?"

"What's going on, the man wants to know," Sirius said to the air. "How do you forget your own wedding?"

"What?"

"Come on, there's our cue!" Sirius sprang across the room and grabbed Remus' wrist, towing him towards the door. "Having second thoughts? She's a lovely girl, I'd take her off your hands if I didn't already have one myself..."

"No, no," Remus said, realizing what must be happening. It's a dream. That's all. It's just a dream. "No, I was just a little distracted. I'm ready now."

"Good. Here we go."

They stepped out into – the Great Hall?

Sure enough, it was the Great Hall at Hogwarts, but Remus had never seen it like this. The tables were gone, replaced with bench-like seats in two sections, all facing the dais where Remus and Sirius stood, and all filled with people. White flowers and ribbons were everywhere, and a balding man was standing on the dais, a few yards away from the two of them, wearing what looked like the official

robes of the Minister of Magic. Sirius practically propelled Remus in his direction. "Just like in rehearsals, Moony," he muttered.

I wish I remembered them, Padfoot! Remus retorted inside his mind, but kept his mouth shut.

The music playing in the room changed into a processional. Two pairs of bridesmaids and ushers walked sedately down the aisle, followed by a maid of honor, and finally the crowd rose to its feet to signify the arrival of the bride.

Her veil was over her face so that Remus couldn't see her, but he knew the man escorting her down the aisle – none other than Albus Dumbledore. He sneaked a look at the wedding party. The brunette bridesmaid looks familiar... I don't know the redheads... the other usher looks like James, only that's not possible. But that is Aletha across from Sirius...

The bride stepped onto the dais and turned to him. Dumbledore gently lifted her veil, and Remus looked into a pair of bright brown eyes lit up with joy, joy he couldn't help but return as he recognized her.

"I was so happy to see you that I forgot I didn't know anything about you." Danger's voice rang in his head. "And suddenly I did know all about you. Everything."

And as Remus joined hands with his bride, he discovered what she had meant.

The life of Gertrude Kelly Granger played itself on fast-forward inside his mind. He learned about her in those few seconds as he might have over the course of months, years, normally.

She had always been bookish and a bit scatter-brained, a quiet girl who loved her family and home above all, who almost never went out, who had never even had a boyfriend or a date. She was all right with children, not stellar but not hopeless either, but she had lost her heart to her baby sister from the first moment she saw the tiny face. She

had only ever worked part-time in her life and was used to everything coming easily, no rough spots or bumps in her road.

Then her parents were killed.

If it hadn't been for Neenie, Remus realized, Danger's world would have ended that day, as his own had practically ended on the previous Halloween. Her parents had been the world to her, as his friends had been to him. She, like him, had considered suicide at one point. But Neenie had needed her, and that had kept her going, forced her to recover and fight back.

And they need me now. Harry, and Danger and Neenie, need me. I can't let them down.

"... as long as you both shall live?" finished the man in official robes, whose fringe of hair proved to be red up close.

Remus realized he was being addressed. "Er, I do."

Apparently it was the correct answer, since the man turned to Danger and repeated what he had said to Remus.

"I do." Her answer rang out clearly through the Hall.

"By the power vested in me by the office of Minister of Magic, I do hereby pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Remus did as he was told.

Danger's voice surfaced in his mind again.

"And please don't take this wrong, but if you kiss in real life like you did in the dream... damn."

Same to you, beautiful. Same to you.

I am definitely in love.

Everything blurred around them as they broke off the kiss, and suddenly they were dancing, swaying in one another's arms to something slow and beautiful, something by Bach, Remus thought.

Danger smiled impishly at him. "I figured out the second quatrain of the poem."

"What, all of it?"

"I think so. Let me see:

"The wolf that runs in brightest dark

"Of fear in danger strikes no spark,

"For she is maid of warrior soul,

"And by her touch his mind is whole.

"The wolf is you, of course – 'brightest dark' means the night when there's the most light, the night of the full moon. So the first line just means you." She laid her head against his shoulder. "My handsome wolf."

"Does 'danger' in the second line mean you?" Remus asked.

"I think it does," Danger said without lifting her head. "And the third line is me. 'Gertrude' means warrior woman, so the 'maid of warrior soul' is me." She pulled away slightly to look him in the eye. "Those first three lines of poetry boil down to the fact that you don't scare me when you transform."

"I don't?"

"Well, the first time, yes. But it won't any more."

"Why not?"

"When you transform, you lose your human mind in the wolf, right?"

"Right."

She smiled, and Remus registered once again how beautiful she was. "I found out tonight that my magic reverses that. I'm a werewolf tamer. When I touch you after you transform, you regain your human mind. You're in control."

In control... Merlin, what that would mean to me...

I'd never have to be afraid again. No one would need to be afraid of me. I wouldn't wear myself out during the full moon night, so I wouldn't need to stay home the next day. I could live a normal life.

If it's true.

Oh, God, please let it be true!

The only problem is, since Danger's the only one who can do the magic, I'd have to stay close to her.

Looking at the woman in his arms, he realized how much he wished this dream-wedding had been real.

This is a problem? Somehow I don't think so...

"And you can't claim you don't know me any more," Danger said with a grin as the music swelled up. "We know all about each other, now. So I feel safe in saying this. I love you, Remus Lupin, wolf of my heart."

Remus felt his voice catch as he started to reply. He had to swallow hard and start over. "I love you, Gertrude Granger, Danger of my life."

She raised her eyebrows. "That sounds terrible."

Remus laughed. "Yes, it does, doesn't it."

Sirius and Aletha were dancing nearby. Dumbledore had led Minerva McGonagall onto the floor. The ushers and bridesmaids had paired off, a redhead to each pairing...

"The red in the poem," Remus said slowly. "The red that's actually orange. Could that mean red hair?"

"You know, I think it could," Danger said, following his line of sight. "But that's something to worry about tomorrow."

As they lost themselves again in the music, Remus couldn't help wishing, just a little, that tomorrow would never come.

(A/N: Took a little longer this time, but it was worth it, right?)

Wow, lots of reviewers this time! You keep RRing, I'll keep writing, and we'll all be happy, right?)

Chapter 5: Laying Plans

Remus Lupin awoke slowly, wondering why he felt so odd, whose hand was wrapped around his, and what, in general, was going on. The sight of moonlight flooding in through a window did not help.

It's full moon tonight. I should still be a wolf. Shouldn't I?

He looked down at himself.

Oh. I am still a wolf.

But I can think. My mind is human. I won't attack anyone.

I can handle that. I guess.

Damn sight better than the alternative.

Danger lay beside him, holding one of his front paws, her chest rising and falling in the even rhythms of sleep.

Well, she said the neighborhood gossips would have us sleeping together within two days. Though I doubt this is what she meant!

I wonder, does this only work when she's touching me, or does one touch last all night?

Carefully, he withdrew his paw from her grasp, forcing himself to stay off balance. If I lose control and go wolf again, I'll fall on her. I may wake her up, but better that than kill her!

Nothing happened. Remus sagged in relief. She was right. She's a werewolf tamer.

I wonder what the theorists will make of her.

Assuming they ever hear about her.

He sniffed. Scents exploded into his nose – dust, food, mice, humans – he could smell Danger's own personal scent, and Harry's, and

Neenie's, and his own from before the transformation. His human sense of smell was more keen than other people's, but the wolf's nose was incredibly sharp. He could even tell how long it had been since she had held either child.

She held Neenie only about two hours ago? That doesn't make sense... unless...

He went into the living room and shoved a window open with nose and paws, something the werewolf wasn't intelligent enough to do on its own, so he didn't have to safeguard against it. Out the window he went, down the lawn to the truck parked in the street.

Sure enough, Hermione's in there. Asleep still, but she's wet, so she may not sleep much longer. He wrinkled his nose. That was quite a penetrating odor.

I should get Danger to bring her in. It's not exactly safe to let her sleep in the truck all night.

But she would have been a lot safer there than in the house two hours ago!

Enjoying his newfound freedom, he leapt lightly back in through the window and gently nudged Danger with his nose until she startled awake.

"What? What is it?" She blinked owlshly at him for a moment and rubbed her eyes, reorienting herself. "So, how do you feel?"

Remus smiled wolf-style, opening his mouth and panting happily. Good. Wonderful. Better than great. I can never tell you how much this means to me.

"So quit telling me, then. Why'd you wake me up anyway?"

You're awfully grouchy at night.

"No, you're too damn cheerful."

Wait a minute. I'm not talking aloud – I can't talk aloud in this form. How are you hearing me?

"You're right." Danger stopped. "I wonder..."

Can you hear this? said her voice in Remus' mind.

Remus jumped a little. Yes. Loud and clear.

This is very interesting. I wonder if it's left over from the shared dream?

At least we won't have to do charades to get the point across.

What point?

Neenie's wet.

Oh my God, Neenie! I left her in the truck!

Well, I wouldn't have recommended bringing her in when you got here, Remus said. But now, I'd say it's a good idea.

Danger was already halfway out the door.

After Neenie had been changed, a process during which she never really woke up, and put back to sleep on a folded blanket on the living room floor, Remus curled himself up next to her and Danger lay down on the couch.

So, did you dream what I dreamed? Danger asked.

A wedding?

Yep. The same dream I had two nights ago, before I met you. Only this time, the knowing went both ways – I knew your life, and you knew mine.

It was incredible. I feel as if I've known you for years.

So do I. Danger rolled onto her stomach and looked down at him. And I meant what I said. While we were dancing.

Remus met her eyes. So did I.

A silence followed, but not exactly an uncomfortable one – more like the silence of two people digesting a big idea simultaneously.

Because that's what it is. I know I need a little time to get my mind around this amazing thing called love, Remus thought, carefully to himself only. And these astounding people who love me. He looked affectionately at Neenie, sound asleep and, of course, sucking her thumb. I would imagine Danger needs to do the same.

So, did you write to Aletha yet? Danger asked after a little while.

This morning. She should answer by tomorrow. Well, today, now.

That's great. Harry was asking for her, and you, and "Pa-foot" all day. You spoiled him; he's not happy with just me and Neenie anymore, Danger teased.

I don't think you could spoil that boy no matter what you did to him.

The Dursleys are certainly trying their hardest, Danger said with a sigh.

Let's not talk about them, not tonight. I have a question I need to ask you.

Yes?

When are we really going to get married?

Five seconds of total silence, verbal and mental, followed this.

You know, if anyone had told me about this a year ago, I would have thought they were nuts, Danger said finally.

Same here. I probably would have believed more of it than you would, but I still wouldn't have believed all of it. And you're avoiding the question.

Don't push me. Danger stared at the ceiling. Tell me this, she said. If we got married, you'd be reliably tame on your wolf nights, because I'd be with you. We'd have a stable home, two loving parents – more or less – and a child around. Is there a chance we'd get custody of Harry, if we asked?

That's a good question. Remus thought about it for a moment. A chance, he said finally. But not much more than that. There might be magical reasons why he's safer with his relatives that would negate any arguments we might make.

Safer from what? Danger demanded tartly. Safer from getting hit?

Getting hit? Are they abusing him?

I have no tangible evidence, but I think so. He flinched today when I swung my hand up in the air. No normal child does that.

Remus growled. For a moment, he felt the wolf mind stir within his own. Kill... kill... blood from those who harm the cub...

Danger placed her hand on the back of his head, and the feelings subsided.

Thanks.

Don't mention it.

So, you still haven't answered my question, Remus said, trying to get the conversation back onto a lighter note.

Trust me, I want to, Danger replied with a melancholy tone to her mental voice. If this were all about us, I'd say I want to get married tomorrow. I do want to get married tomorrow. But it's not just about us. It's about a little boy we both love, who's not getting what he needs.

We're adults – we can do pretty much what we please. He's helpless. We should think about him first, before ourselves.

I stand corrected. Or lie corrected. Or whatever. Harry comes first. Remus yawned enormously. And I think we should continue this conversation in the morning.

Works for me. Danger yawned in her turn, then wiggled around for a moment until she was lying on her stomach, one arm dangling from the couch, hand resting on Remus' back. In case you feel wolfish during the night, she explained.

I appreciate that.

Good, because actually I just want an excuse to be close to you. Danger giggled, both mentally and aloud.

And I really appreciate that, Remus said, allowing his own amusement to bleed into the link between them. Sleep well.

You too.

The raft floated on down the river. Harry seemed to grow heavier in Remus' lap, and when he looked down, he saw that the boy was growing, aging before his eyes. Already he had the look of a three-year-old. Neenie was growing as well, to Danger's obvious surprise.

Sirius held out his hands to Aletha, who took them in hers with a smile. A moment later, when they let go, Aletha had a pearl in her hand. It was larger than any Remus had ever seen and shimmered with the play of the sunlight on it. She cradled it to her tenderly.

Danger shifted Neenie to the raft beside her as the girl continued to grow. She and Harry were losing the awkwardness of toddlers and taking on the more shapely forms of young children. Remus noticed that Harry's resemblance to his father was getting more pronounced as the boy grew older.

A wordless cry attracted everyone's attention. A woman was swimming toward them with a tiny dragon on her back. She was

being pursued by a man, his face twisted with anger. Her expression was pleading.

Sirius reached out and took the dragonet from her, lifting it onto their raft. The woman smiled at them for a moment, then turned and swam at her pursuer, striking at him with her hands and feet. They sank together in the middle of the river, and there was no more trace of them.

The dragonet curled up in Sirius' lap, shivering. After a few moments in the sun, though, it stretched and yawned, displaying its beautiful scales for everyone to see. Each adult stroked its back once or twice, and it hummed with pleasure.

I suppose this is another dream. It certainly doesn't make much sense. But it is quite peaceful, rather enjoyable in its way...

Danger smiled at him from across the raft. He smiled back.

Scratch that. Very enjoyable.

He closed his eyes, letting the warmth of the sun soak into him...
Remus Lupin awoke all at once, in possession of several interesting facts.

First off, it was morning, and he was human again. While this usually delighted him, he was usually alone when it happened. On this particular day, an extremely attractive (to him, at least) human woman was asleep on his couch. Her hand was actually resting on his skin. While he enjoyed the sensation very much, the fact that he was not wearing any clothes might make the situation more than a little awkward if she were to wake up suddenly.

Added to this, a sleeping position which is comfortable for a wolf might not be such for a human.

I think my cramps have cramps.

And thirdly, someone had just rung his doorbell.

He looked around and spotted a spare blanket which he pulled quickly over himself – just in time, as Danger stirred to the second ringing of the doorbell. "Mmmm?" she said sleepily.

"Someone's at the door," Remus said.

"So answer it."

"I can't. I'm not dressed."

Danger's eyes shot open, and she surveyed him. "Oh."

"Will you get it?"

"I don't live here."

"Whoever is at the door doesn't need to know that. Just tell them I'm in the bathroom and I'll be right down."

"Will you?"

"Be right down? Yes. Will you close your eyes for a moment, please?"

"You asked me to marry you last night, now all of a sudden you're shy?"

"We're not married yet." Remus waited until she had her eyes tightly closed before quickly wrapping the blanket around his waist like a towel. "I'll be right back."

He hurried up the stairs, limping a little, as Danger called, "Coming!" to the person at the door.

He was in his bedroom when he heard the squeals of a feminine greeting ritual. "Oh, I haven't seen you in so long!" rose from below, in two-part harmony.

Who in the world – oh. It must be Aletha.

She came herself instead of owling back? I did get her attention.

Maybe I'll take a little longer than I actually need to – they've got a lot of catching up to do.

By the time he made it downstairs, the squealing had subsided, and Aletha was making friends with Neenie.

"Remus," she said in greeting, shaking his hand. "I didn't expect to find you hanging around with this little barrel of trouble."

"Oh, you're a fine one to talk," Danger said. "Who put the frog in Mrs. Walsh's mailbox?"

"Yeah, well, who glued five 50p coins to the sidewalk?"

It seemed likely that they could, and would, go on all day. Remus intervened. "Would anyone care for breakfast?"

"Not if you're cooking," Aletha said frankly.

"I'll cook," Danger said. "What do you have around?"

Pancakes were duly decided on and made. Everyone was halfway through a second serving when Aletha asked, "So what's this about Harry?"

Remus and Danger looked at each other.

"You start," Remus said, helping himself to another pancake.

Danger explained where Harry was living, with whom, and what was wrong with that. Aletha appeared to be taking it all very calmly, but Remus noticed that she was slowly shredding her paper napkin in her lap.

Remus took over, explaining what Danger had dreamed, and how he knew it was true. When he got to the part about Wormtail, not Sirius, being the traitor, he got a chance to see what his face must have looked like when Danger told him about her talent in their dream last

night. Aletha's expression varied from astonishment, to joy, to incredulous hope and lingered there. She looked as if he had just handed her the greatest desire of her heart.

Maybe I did. She loved – loves – Sirius. And I've just told her he's not the murdering traitor she's had to think he is for six months. That sounds like something worth having.

"Now I have to tell you something about me," Remus said. "It's why Peter and James and Sirius became Animagi. I'm..." It was still hard to tell, but Danger squeezed his hand, and he took the plunge. "I'm a werewolf."

"Werewolf?" Aletha repeated, her eyes wide.

"There wolf," Danger said in a guttural voice. "There castle."

Aletha stared at both of them for a moment, then cracked a smile. "Why are you talking like that?"

"I thought you wanted me to," Danger said.

"No, I don't want you to," said Aletha.

"Suit yourself, I'm easy," chorused Danger and Remus, and all three of them started laughing.

Thank you, Remus said privately to Danger. That could have been much worse.

I don't think so. She knows you, she trusts you. You haven't changed just because she's found out something new about you.

You'd be surprised how many people don't think like that. Remus was surprised himself, at how bitter he sounded in his mind.

Forget them, Danger said emphatically. I love you, Neenie and Harry love you, and Letha at least trusts you. Look at her. She doesn't look scared or on edge. She's as comfortable around you as she was ten minutes ago.

"It's actually a relief to know," Aletha said, ignorant of the silent exchange. "I always wondered where you'd go for a couple days out of every month. Now I know. Besides, werewolves aren't dangerous when it's not full moon, are they – ah, you?"

"No." Remus grinned, realizing that he could add something to that. "And actually, I'm not dangerous at full moon any more, either."

"Pardon?"

They explained about Danger's unusual abilities. Aletha was duly impressed, and let Danger try out her wand. Danger generated more sparks with Aletha's than she had with Remus', something which, strangely, made Remus feel a little jealous.

The wand chooses the wizard, he reminded himself. Or the witch.

But it still annoyed him.

"So, the way I see it, we have two things we need to do as soon as we possibly can," Aletha said. "We have to get Sirius out of Azkaban, and we have to get Harry out of that house."

"What about finding Wormtail?" Remus objected.

"All right, make that three things. But I don't see that there's any easy way to do that. I mean, yes, we have the poem, and we know that he's somewhere around red-haired people. If that's even the right way to read it. But there are thousands of red-haired people in the world, and he could be anywhere. I think we're going to have to let that one go for the time being."

"How do you suggest we free Sirius, then, if not by finding Wormtail?" Remus asked.

"Well, there's two ways to do it. Legally, or extralegally. Legally, without Wormtail, it would be difficult to prove Sirius didn't kill those people."

"Difficult? Try impossible," Danger objected, cutting some more pancake for Neenie. "You can't prove a negative."

"You know what I mean," Aletha growled, shoving her friend playfully. "But you're right. It will be damn near impossible. So that leaves extralegally."

"Breaking him out," Remus said. "That's supposed to be impossible."

"It was supposed to be impossible to defeat You-Know-Who," Aletha pointed out. "And Harry Potter didn't have a contact in the Ministry with high security clearances. You do. I can get information about Azkaban that the average witch on the street can't get. Such as where it is, and how to get there."

"But the dementors would notice an extra person walking around the prison, wouldn't they?" Remus asked. "I mean, they're soulless, but they're not stupid."

"No, what they are is blind," Aletha said, her face taut in concentration. "I have an idea. Just the beginning of an idea. Let me talk it out for a second."

She got up and began to pace around. "The dementors are blind. They get around by hearing, and by sensing people's emotions. People's emotions. They can tell where people are by their emotions. Where human beings are. Human emotions. Human."

"What about animals?" Danger said suddenly. "Can they sense animal emotions?"

"I don't know," Aletha said slowly, looking up from her reverie. "I do – not – know. Hmm. Animal emotions. Do animals have emotions?"

"Haven't you ever seen a dog when its dinner is late?" Remus asked. "Trust me, animals have emotions. They're different than human emotions, though – not as advanced..."

"So maybe the dementors wouldn't sense an animal," Danger said. "Or not as easily."

Aletha nodded. "So an animal could get in, but I don't see..."

"A full moon," Remus said, snapping his fingers. "I'll go. During a full moon. While I'm the wolf. They won't sense me, because I'm an animal, but I'll have my human mind, so I'll be able to avoid them. And Sirius can avoid them as Padfoot."

"That's it." Aletha pounded her fist into her palm jubilantly. "That is it. That is the thought I was chasing. You two, between you, got it before I did." She grinned. "I would say, offhand, that we make a good team."

"Me too," Danger said strongly. "What kind of locks do they have on the doors there? Is it a simple catch, something you could undo with your paws, Remus, or are they key locks? Those would be hard to open without hands."

"That's what I can find out," Aletha said. "I'll do some research tomorrow."

The excitement in the room was almost tangible. Remus could scent it, even with his limited human sense of smell. "What about Harry?" he said.

"Harry's easy," Danger said, waving a negligent hand. "In and out, just take him and vanish. If we're going to liberate a criminal, we're going to need to hide out anyway, so we might as well hide two people as one."

"True enough," Aletha said. "Have to give some thought to where to hide them, and how. Everyone'll be looking for Sirius, and Harry, as soon as it gets out that they're gone."

"Sirius has a perfect disguise," Remus said. "No one except James, Peter, and I knew he was an Animagus. Harry will be a bit more difficult."

"Have to dye his hair or something," Danger said. She looked speculatively at Remus' brown hair. "Wait a second. Aletha, look at

us." She waved at herself, Neenie, and Remus. "We look like a family to you?"

"Sure thing," Aletha said, nodding thoughtfully. "If Harry had brown hair, he could pass for Neenie's brother. Non-identical twins, whatever they're called."

"Fraternal." Remus felt almost buoyant. "Just a married couple, their children – fraternal twins – and the family dog. Nothing unusual about that, is there?"

"All you'd need is a house somewhere, or an apartment," Aletha said. "Might be tough to find one that's pet and child friendly, though. Rents can be pretty steep."

"If we can spring Sirius, money will not be a problem," Remus said, grinning. "As long as you have the right key, the goblins don't care whose vault you're accessing. And they don't tell anyone anything."

"Goblins?" Danger asked. "I don't think we covered this."

Aletha began to explain about Gringotts and goblins and wizarding finance in general. Danger listened intently while washing syrup off Neenie's hands and face. Remus sat back and luxuriated in the amazing changes his life had taken over the past two days.

Let's see. I have control over a part of me I've never been able to control before. I've acquired a wife and two children who love me – just getting into the terrible twos, but we'll deal with that – and I've regained two friends.

Even if one of them is currently trapped in hell on earth.

He winced. Thinking of Sirius, in Azkaban for a crime he hadn't committed, was painful, to say the least.

But at least now we know he's innocent, and we're going to do something about it.

Hold on, Sirius. We're coming.

Just hold on.

(A/N: Hee hee hee! I can't resist capital letters telling me to UPDATE!

Well, yes I can. I will probably never update quite this fast again. But I just happened to have a whole bunch of free time tonight. So here is a new chapter to clear up confusion.

I'm sorry, btw... I didn't mean to confuse... so special treat to make up for it – two chapters in one! Enjoy, and review both if the mood strikes you! I love reviews, the more the better!)

Chapter 6: Preparations

The doorbell of Number Four Privet Drive rang. Petunia Dursley looked up, startled. "Oh, I have to go, someone's at the door," she said into the phone. "I'll call you later, dear, don't worry."

She opened the door and put on her best smile. The Granger slut, how interesting. Maybe I can find out where she went last night, and why she never came back... "Why, Gertrude, how nice to see you, dear!"

"Hello, Mrs. Dursley. Neenie and I were wondering if Harry could come over to play."

"Yes, of course. Just a moment, I'll get him ready." Petunia shut the door quickly. It wouldn't do to have the nosy girl see where they kept the brat.

She opened the door of the cupboard under the stairs. Her nephew looked up, startled. "Come along, Harry," she said in a sweet voice, in case the slut was listening. "Time to go out and play."

The boy blinked at her in bemusement. She stifled a sigh. I don't think he understands a word I say to him. Probably retarded. She lifted him out of the crib and set him on the bottom step, slid a pair of Dudley's outgrown shoes onto his feet, and fetched his coat from the floor of the cupboard. "All ready to go, now," she said sweetly as she opened the door again.

"Dayger!" Harry jumped up and ran to the girl, who scooped him off his feet and landed him expertly on her hip.

"Hello, Greeneyes," she said, ruffling his hair. "When should I have him home?"

"Can you give him lunch today, dear, or do you have to work late again?"

"Again?"

"Yes, we saw you go out last night. What in heaven's name had you running off like that at such an hour?"

"I had a phone call from a friend who needed some help unexpectedly, that's all."

"No emergency, I hope?"

"No, everything's quite all right now. Thank you for asking." The girl put a delicate emphasis on the last few words that Petunia was sure meant Mind your own business. She was intrigued. People seldom reacted so rudely unless they had something to hide.

"You're welcome, dear. Now about luncheon..."

"I think I can manage lunch for him. Shall we say five o'clock then?"

"Five it is. Thank you so much, you're such a good neighbor to watch him like this."

"Oh, you're quite welcome," the girl said, possibly with a bit of sarcasm. Petunia couldn't be sure.

She watched from behind the curtains as the girl walked down the front steps with her nephew, talking to him. Then she put him down and watched as he raced along the sidewalk to meet – well, well. How interesting. Two other people.

A dark-skinned woman went down on one knee to meet the little boy's rush, and a brown-haired man – she couldn't be sure at this distance, but he looked like the same one she had surprised in the slut's kitchen two days before – stood beside them with the Granger child in his arms.

Hermione. Gertrude's "sister". Petunia snorted. As if that's not the oldest trick in the book. If that child's her sister, I'm a toad. And that might very well be the father, right there. Finally decided to come back and pay a visit, has he?

It had a convincing sound. With Gertrude being twenty years older, and no intervening children, there had been speculation on the true parentage of Hermione Granger since the day she was born, conveniently while the family was vacationing in Scotland. And even as Petunia watched, Gertrude caught up with Harry and embraced the man in greeting, taking the little girl from him. The dark woman stood up with Harry in her arms, and the five of them walked off towards the Grangers'.

Petunia hurried back to the phone. She had so much more to tell dear Mrs. Harrison than she had planned...

"Second breakfast, anyone?" Danger said as she handed Neenie back to Remus and unlocked the door.

"Feeling a little hobbitish today?" Aletha teased.

"Well, I'm feeding Harry at any rate. I doubt he's eaten yet today."

"Don't be silly, it's past 10. Why wouldn't they have fed him?"

"Because," Danger led the way to the kitchen, "they hardly ever remember him unless he cries." She flicked the lights on. "And then they punish him for crying, with the most common punishment being, no meals."

"How can they punish a two-year-old for crying?" Aletha asked in bewilderment. "It doesn't make any sense."

"Don't look for sense out of the Dursleys," Danger said, rooting through the pantry. "The end result is, he only gets fed about once a day. Twice if he's lucky. Why do you think he's so skinny?"

"Lord, he is," Aletha said worriedly, poking Harry in the side, disguising it as a tickle and making him laugh. "I can feel his ribs. I think I could count them if he had his shirt off. What kind of people would do that?"

"They hate magic," Remus said, sitting down with Neenie on his lap. "They hate anything they see as abnormal, and they fear being

labeled as abnormal themselves by being involved with it. They may be hoping to squash Harry's magic somehow."

"Well, that's not going to work," Aletha said, putting Harry in his high chair. "Kids do more accidental magic when they're unhappy, not less. Do these Dursleys know anything about child-raising at all?"

"Judging by their son, I would say... no." Danger started spreading peanut butter on crackers. "Letha, would you get him some juice? It's in the fridge, and sippy cups are in the second cabinet here... thanks."

Aletha did as she was asked, handing Harry the sippy cup with an octopus painted on the side.

"So what is Harry's cousin like?" Remus asked, bouncing Neenie on his knees. "Other than mean."

"That sums him up pretty well, actually," Danger said loudly as Harry banged his sippy cup against the high chair tray, yelling in time with the noise. "Big, fat, spoiled, and mean."

She tipped the peanut butter crackers onto Harry's tray, and the banging ceased abruptly as he grabbed for them.

"He eats like he's starving," Remus noted quietly.

"There are a lot of times I wish I wasn't right." Danger sat down at the table. "This is one of them." Neenie slid off Remus' lap and pattered around to her sister, climbing onto her lap and cuddling up to her.

"So we're agreed," Aletha said. "We have to get him away from those people."

Danger nodded. "Agreed."

"Yes, agreed," said Remus. "But we have to have a plan. We can't just take him and run, as tempting as it is."

"Like we were saying earlier, someplace to go. Someplace they'd never think to look." Aletha sighed. "My place would be perfect, except it'd be the first place they'd go. After yours, Remus. Did you even know Harry was here?"

"No. Not until I met Danger in the park the other day. You?"

Aletha shook her head. "I don't think anyone knew. Dumbledore kept it pretty close."

"And you know why," Remus said, looking at Harry, who had eaten five of the crackers and was smashing the sixth with his sippy cup. "He was afraid we'd do exactly what we're doing. Take him ourselves."

"But if his aunt and uncle had only been decent," Aletha began, "we would never have interfered..." A horrible thought crossed her mind. "Do you think he knows?"

"He can't," Remus said firmly. "He would never let Harry get hurt. He might well know they're not happy about the idea of magic, but I can't believe he would know about Harry being starved or locked up and not do something about it."

"He should have been a little more observant, then," Aletha said angrily. "At least have someone in the area, someone to watch over him and make sure he's all right."

"These things take time to arrange," Danger noted. "You can't buy a house overnight. Maybe his observer's just not here yet."

"Well, that's not good enough." Aletha was starting to get really angry. "What if they start abusing him? What if they start beating him up? We can't wait. We have to do something now!"

"We are doing something," Remus said calmly. "Several things. First, we're making plans about what to do next. Second, we're making sure Harry gets at least semi-regular meals. Third, we're giving him time to be a normal child, with people who love him. Besides, the

person with the true authority on what should happen to Harry isn't here."

"Who's that?" Danger asked.

"Sirius. Sirius was – he is – Harry's godfather, and the guardian James and Lily appointed. They wanted to make you his godmother, Letha, but you were out of touch on some secret mission or other. So if – when – we free Sirius and take Harry, we'll be respecting Lily and James' wishes about their son."

Aletha nodded, her anger dissipating in admiration. "Are you always this sneaky?" she asked.

"Only when I need to be," Remus said with a smile.

The phrase touched off a recent memory in Aletha's brain. I need to be getting out of here... this city's driving me bonkers...

A plan unfolded in front of her so suddenly that she yelled, startling both children. "Got it!"

"What?" Remus and Danger asked in unison.

"I live in a mostly Muggle part of London, in a duplex. The owner has the other half, and he's trying to sell it. Claims London is driving him mad. But it's a big, kind of old and creaky house, so no one really wants it. If we all went in on it, maybe we could buy it. Then we'd have the entire house to ourselves, no one to bother us."

"If I sold this place..." Danger stared at the ceiling. "This is a desirable neighborhood. I could probably get a decent price. And I've been thinking about moving for a while."

"I'm in," Remus said. "My house isn't in the best of shape, but some people like to renovate. With the money from two sales, I'd say we could probably do it."

"And there's our place to go," Aletha said, grinning. "I'll spend my savings to buy the building – consider it an investment – and rent the

other half to a nice couple with two kids and a dog. Danger, how soon can you be ready to go?"

"Depends on how soon I can get the house sold," Danger said. For the first time since Aletha had seen her, the mischievous side she had showed as a child blossomed in her face. Then it was swamped by a wave of worry. "What about Harry? If I leave, he's back with the Dursleys full time."

The boy in question carefully dropped his cup over the side of his high chair. Aletha picked it up for him.

"Only for a week or two," Remus said. "Only until we get settled in the house, and people get used to seeing us around. Then we come back for him."

"Why wait?" Danger asked as Harry tossed his cup to the floor again. "Don't keep giving it back to him," she advised Aletha. "He can keep that up all night."

"So we have an alibi," said Remus. "When the Ministry goes looking for Harry Potter, they won't look at the little boy who's been living at Number 29 for two weeks now, because how could he be Harry Potter? Harry Potter was still with his aunt and uncle two weeks ago."

"But we won't have him when we move in," Danger objected.

"They don't need to know that," Remus pointed out. "If you say you have two children, no one's going to doubt you. Stay inside a lot the first two weeks, let them see Neenie once in a while, and they'll believe you. You can be the put-upon mother who has to go ahead to the new home and get it ready, with the children in tow. I'll be the lazy father who comes afterwards with the dog."

Aletha sighed happily. "And then I get to adopt the dog. Or the dog adopts me."

"Or the dog marries you," Danger said with a wink.

Aletha laughed. "Now that, we'd better not tell the neighbors about!"

Danger twisted the ring on her finger with a smile. I almost don't believe it. I'm married. And married to a man I only met two weeks ago.

But I know him as well as I know myself. And I'm certain that he loves me.

And besides, he's cute.

They had filled out the necessary forms and produced the correct documents (some of them had to be forged in a hurry, but with magic, that was no trouble) and gone before a judge yesterday, with Aletha as their witness, and now "John and Kelly White" were legally married. It was nothing like the elaborate wedding they had dreamed of, but it would do.

And we have our place to go. Aletha's landlord had been overjoyed to find a buyer for his admittedly old and rather drafty house. Aletha had put up all the money for the purchase herself so it could go through right away, with the understanding that Remus and Danger would pay her their shares as soon as they got the money. "And there's no hurry," Aletha had said on the phone. "He was so happy to get rid of it that he sold it to me dirt cheap. He's leaving on 26 March, so you can move in any time after that."

Danger had had no trouble selling her house. A family called the Polkisses, with one son and another child on the way, had snapped it up the second day it was on the market, and the closing was in a week.

Maybe their boy will make friends with Dudley, Danger thought idly. In fact, I hope he does. The Dursleys deserve a destructive little monster like him in their house. Piers Polkiss had managed to rip down one of the curtains in the living room, despite being in the house for only five minutes, and his mother had apologized in a way that made it quite clear she thought it was Danger's fault for not putting them up better.

Oh well, in two weeks it's their problem anyway.

Remus wasn't having quite as much luck. A couple of people had come by to look at his house, but so far he hadn't had any offers.

And if I don't, I'll just leave the door unlocked, and whoever finds it can have it, said his voice in her mind, making her jump. You think too loud, love.

You're spying, she retorted.

Am not.

Are too.

You're broadcasting, beautiful. How am I supposed to avoid hearing you?

Oops. Sorry.

Not a problem. His mental touch caressed hers, as loving as an embrace. I'm touched that you consider me cute.

Darn you, Remus, how long have you been listening?

Long enough. I'm coming over, I'll be there soon.

Is that a promise or a threat?

He laughed. Neither. Both. I'll see you in a few minutes.

Danger returned to her ruminations, being careful to think quietly.

So. Today is Tuesday, 30 March. On 1 April, Neenie and I leave for London. With everything we own, even the furniture – even my truck! – in one suitcase. Isn't magic wonderful.

And we're traveling by magic, too, so no one will see us go, or know which way we went. We could be going to America or just to the next block, and no one would know.

Remus and Harry would make the journey on the Knight Bus with them, so that their new neighbors would see the entire family together, including two children, and Danger would Floo back to Remus' house that night to return Harry and say goodbye to the Dursleys. One more bit of confusion about when we left won't do any harm.

And at least Harry won't be entirely alone. The Dursleys had been less unhappy than Danger had thought they might when she told them she was moving. It seemed an older woman who lived in the area had recently contacted them about babysitting, and she charged less than Danger did. Oh, heavens, what's her name? I can't think of it. Plum, or something fruity. Figg, that's it. Mrs. Figg. She filed it to tell Remus.

So let me see. After we get there, we just bide our time for about two more weeks. And then, we strike.

The magical world is going to be reeling on 14 April. Two disappearances in one night.

Well, strictly speaking, Harry's going to disappear the night before. But if I know the Dursleys, word won't get to the magical world until the next day at the earliest. Possibly even later. Heck, the Dursleys won't even notice he's gone until sometime the next day!

And just to make everyone really nervous, a burglary. That was Aletha's part of the illegal work, and it would be accomplished at the Museum of Magical Curiosities in London. One of the curiosities they had on display was the "Wand of Sirius Black, with which he murdered..."

I can see it now. Mass confusion. Everyone will want to know – are the crimes connected? How were they done? And in the chaos, Remus Lupin quietly disappears, and John White comes home to his wife Kelly and their children James and Jane, bringing their faithful dog Padfoot with him...

The doorbell rang, and thoughts of future contentment were lost in present bliss as Danger greeted her husband.

When she told him about Harry's new babysitter, he started laughing almost hysterically. It took him five minutes to calm down and explain that he knew Arabella Figg, that she was what the magical world called a Squib – from a magical family, but not magical herself – and that she was probably the observer they had postulated Dumbledore might send.

"And she's too late by far," Remus said almost gleefully, settling down on the couch and smiling as Danger sat beside him, draping his arm over her shoulders. "Neenie asleep?"

"Fast asleep and dreaming. She asked where you were before bed, though. Stay the night? She'll be happy to see you in the morning."

"And you won't?" he teased gently. "Did you only marry me for my pretty face?"

"No, of course not. I married you because I love all of you. And that's your mind," she kissed his temple, "your heart," she kissed his chest, "and your body..."

It was quite some time before either of the newlyweds slept.
(A/N: Ah, keeping it PG-13, isn't it fun...

You are all amazing! Thank you so much for all your kind (and LONG – I like long) reviews!)

Chapter 7: Curse

Whoof.

Magic or no magic, moving is exhausting.

Danger lay draped across the couch, feeling as if she would like to stay there for, oh, about ten years or so.

Wake me in time for Neenie's Hogwarts letter, she thought drowsily. Neenie had almost set the kitchen on fire when Remus had let her play with his wand one day. She was clearly a witch, and a powerful one. Aletha said she'd only seen comparable sparks from one baby, and that was Harry.

We're going to be an interesting household, to be sure. A latent and untrained witch, a werewolf, an escaped convict, a Ministry witch with a double life, and two of the most powerful magical children in the country.

They had made sure to arrive at the time Aletha said her nosiest neighbors were always watching, driving up almost ostentatiously in Danger's truck. The Knight Bus had dropped them off about a mile away, and Remus had restored the truck to full size, along with some of the furniture to put in the back. They would claim the rest had come with the house, if anyone asked.

Danger and Remus had got out of the truck, having a loud and pointless argument. Each had removed a child from a car seat – Remus had taken Neenie and Danger a light-haired Harry – and proceeded to the front door, where Danger couldn't find the keys in her purse. She got Remus to hold Harry so she could look better. The children needed no prompting to squirm, so that he had to put them down, and once down, of course, they ran away, so that he had to chase them.

When it came time to move the furniture in, Harry and Neenie got underfoot as much as possible, until Aletha had pity and came outdoors to watch them. Thankfully, their story included that Aletha was an old friend of the family, or someone might have got suspicious

about the way the children greeted her. Remus and Danger bickered about everything, then kissed a moment later, and then started bickering again.

In short, they had established themselves well, in the neighborhood eye, as a married couple with two rambunctious toddlers.

Remus and Aletha were in the process of unshrinking and arranging the upstairs furniture, while Danger kept an eye on the children. Aletha had also altered the house itself in some respects before they arrived. Disguised doors and archways had been strategically placed in the dividing wall between the two parts of the house, so that to an outsider, it would still look like a normal duplex, but when the family was alone at home, they could use both parts as needed.

Six toilets in the house will make potty-training easier...

A screech from very nearby drew her attention.

“Hey! No pulling hair, you two.”

Neenie released Harry and went over to her book basket, where she picked out a book and started “reading”. Harry followed her, picked out his own book, and brought it over to Danger. “Dayger, read?”

“All right.” She lifted him onto the couch. “Neenie, storytime.”

The little girl raced over and climbed up onto the sofa, on the other side of Danger from Harry. Danger opened the book to the first page and began.

“In the great green room there was a telephone, and a red balloon, and a picture of the cow jumping over the moon...”

All too soon, everything was away where it belonged, and it was time for Danger to take Harry home. She held his hand as Remus drove them from his house to the Dursleys’, wishing she could explain, in words the little boy would understand, that she wasn’t abandoning him, that it wouldn’t be forever, just two weeks...

But when you're not even two yet, two weeks seems like forever.

The least I can do is try.

"Harry, Danger has to go bye-bye for a while. It's going to feel like a long, long time. But I'll come back for you, OK? Danger's coming back. I promise. I'm coming back."

Harry nodded solemnly and tugged at her hair, and she laughed weakly. "Oh, you're too little, you can't understand." And you pull my heartstrings the way you pull my hair, little one. God, I wish I didn't have to do this...

He'll be all right, Remus said from the front seat. What can happen to him in two weeks? But she could sense his fear, an acid taste to his mind's touch. Let me say good night to him?

She handed Harry forward, and he giggled and grabbed for the glasses Remus was still wearing, as a part of his guise as John White. He had also charmed his hair rather blonder than its usual color, and he was considering growing a beard. Danger liked men with beards, but she had first loved her wolf without one... what a conundrum...

Oh, don't forget to take the charm off him, she said as she remembered. I would have a hard time explaining how I took him out with black hair and brought him home with blond!

Remus laughed and removed the charm from Harry's head. He fell into a puddle of peroxide, of course. These things happen.

Did you make up excuses that crazy at school?

No. Much crazier. The odd part is, some of them were true...

Danger rolled her eyes and held out her arms. I'll want to hear this. But later. I'd better take him in now.

She walked up the front steps feeling rather like a tumbrel, delivering a victim to the guillotine.

Well, well, morbid tonight, aren't we. He will be FINE. Now stop this nonsense and smile.

"Here he is, Mrs. Dursley, and I'll just say goodbye now, because I probably won't see you again. We're leaving early tomorrow. Very early."

"Oh, just you and your sister? Who's that handsome young man out in the car? Not the same gentleman who was here a few weeks ago, is he?"

"That's my husband. And I really should be getting back, if you'll excuse me..."

"Why, I didn't know you were married!"

"Didn't you?" Danger smiled politely. "Bye, Harry. Goodbye, Mrs. Dursley." And may you get exactly what you deserve. Sooner rather than later.

She turned around and walked away. Behind her she heard Harry begin to wail. "Dayger... Dayger... Dayger..."

The wails continued, getting louder and louder, as Danger unabashedly ran back to the car, unable to stay and listen one second longer than she had to.

It's only two weeks, Remus said as she got in. Nothing too terrible can happen in two weeks. Besides, Arabella Figg is around here, and I'm sure she's watching after him.

The words would have been cheering, except that Danger couldn't be sure if Remus was trying to comfort her or himself.

As if to counteract the necessity of leaving Harry at the Dursleys', the plan for freeing Sirius was going immensely well. Aletha had been working late for months, trying to drown her sorrows in work and exhaustion, so that no one even thought any more about the fact that she was in the office late at night, alone.

“A lot of files aren’t even locked at night,” she told Remus and Danger over dinner. “And the ones that are, I have the passwords for.”

“Won’t they be able to trace the passwords to you?” Danger asked.

“Yeah, me and about 50 others. Granted, they might look a little harder at me with my record with Sirius, but actually not too many people knew how close we were. And I was kind of vocal about him to a reporter shortly after... it happened.” Aletha examined her dinner closely. “I think the operative phrase was, ‘I hope he rots there.’”

“We were all angry,” Remus said, pressing her shoulder. “Angry and in shock and disbelieving. And rightly so, as it turns out. But we have a chance now. We can’t waste it with regrets.”

“True enough.” Aletha straightened up. “Anyway, here’s what I found...”

The Ministry may rely on these dementor things a little more than they should, Danger thought. In Muggle terms, apart from its location, Azkaban wasn’t really all that secure. Most of the doors, even the ones on the cells themselves, were closed with simple bolts, which Remus would be able to open with his teeth and paws. Also, the building was surrounded by bars, but they weren’t very closely set. A human might not be able to get through, but wolves and dogs were more streamlined.

Best of all, there were only wards against Apparation or Disapparation on the building itself, not on the whole island. That meant that Remus could Apparate there, get Sirius out, and they would have most of the night to swim back.

Assuming Remus could Apparate in his wolf form. That was the one thing they weren’t going to be able to test. But no sense worrying about that. If he can’t, we’ll know it that night and not before.

“If Animagi can do it in animal form – and they can – I should be able to,” was Remus’ reasoning. “We can’t Apparate back, Sirius

won't be up to it, and he won't know where we're going. But with the distance we'll have to swim, that's the only way we can do it in one night."

They had taken a road trip north and found a stretch of shoreline, close to the place the escapees would probably come ashore, with a gentle slope out of the water and tree cover nearby.

"I'll get the scent of this place in wolf form," Remus told Danger, "so I have something to aim for once I'm on the island. That's my one fear, that we might aim wrong. I'd never survive this water temperature as a human, if we're still in the ocean at moonset."

"There's still time to back out."

"Now that sounds like a challenge, and if there's one thing I can't resist, it's a challenge."

"What about me? Can you resist me?" Danger smiled impishly.

"Hmmm." Remus appeared to give the question serious thought. "No."

Further conversation was irrelevant for a time.

Until a small voice said indignantly, "Moony, no kiss Dayger!"

Conversation was still irrelevant after that, but for a different reason. Namely, the would-be participants were laughing so hard they could barely breathe.

That sister of mine.

She is going to be quite something when she grows up.

If we let her live that long, Remus commented.

Remus and Danger spent some of their free time job-hunting. They made it clear that they could only do part-time work, and the employers made it clear that this meant low pay and, probably, little

respect. Still, they eventually found work, Remus at a supermarket, Danger at a bookstore. Danger had a good laugh over the possibilities of a werewolf loose in the meat department, until Aletha pointed out that Danger's propensities in a bookstore were alarmingly similar. The resulting pillow fight lasted for nearly an hour.

"I don't know why you're bothering," Aletha said after they finally called a truce. "My salary's good, and Sirius has a pile of gold all his own. Why do you two need to work?"

"I hate freeloaders," Danger said promptly, on top of Remus' firm "I won't take charity."

"Besides, it'll give us something to do," Danger went on. "We like each other a lot, but without something to get us out of the house, we'll be at each other's throats within weeks."

"And your position's more than a little precarious, Letha," Remus added. "If, somehow, someone found out where we were, what do you think would happen to you? Harboring a kidnapped child and a dangerous criminal – marrying him? The criminal, not the child," he added quickly as the women laughed. "They'd be after us so fast we'd be lucky to get away with anything."

"It gives us more credibility with the neighbors, too," said Danger. "They'll see us working and say to themselves, 'Oh, there's John White, there's Kelly White, I know them, they live on my street, next door to the nice Freeman girl. They're not strange, no, not at all. Nothing unusual about them.' That's the image we need. Perfectly normal."

"Like the Dursleys?" Remus asked with a straight face.

"No, not like the Dursleys!" Danger whomped him over the head with a pillow. "The Dursleys work so hard on being normal that they're abnormal. Normal like Letha." She waved at her friend, who inclined her head graciously. "She goes to work every day, she comes home, she minds her own business, so no one ever suspects she's actually a witch."

“Yes, you too can pass as a Muggle for the amazingly low price of just fourteen-ninety-five,” said Aletha in a bad TV announcer voice. “Call this toll-free number today...”

She was hit with two pillows at once.

The one other thing that Remus spent a good deal of time doing was finding documents, the official documents dealing with one Gertrude Granger and her sister Hermione, and altering them so that they now dealt with Kelly White and her daughter Jane. He also found the records for Harry Potter, what few there were, and changed them over to the name of James White, and put the name John White on his own Muggle-world records.

Muggles do love their paper trails. It's my job to see that this trail goes only where I want it to.

So tax forms were carefully changed, doctors' records were modified. Even their marriage license was altered, so that their actual wedding day appeared to be their third anniversary. Danger's driver's license was easily changed, as was his own, both in name and appearance. He had decided against the beard, since he had gone to Diagon Alley once with his hair blond and the glasses on and had seen several acquaintances, none of whom had shown any sign of recognition.

So, now we have new faces and names, jobs and backgrounds, a home and a daughter. All we need is a son and a dog, and we're the perfect family.

And they knew where to get both of those.

But we have to wait. And God, how I hate waiting!

At last – at last – it was the night of 12 April. The moon would be full the next night. The day had been spent half in frantic, last-minute preparations, and half in nail-biting worry. As he climbed into the driver's seat of the truck, Remus felt an odd calm wash over him.

This is it. We're finally going to do it. No more waiting, no more worrying. Just action.

Just don't run us into anything on the way there, Danger said from the passenger side. She checked the back seat to make sure they had everything. Car seat, nappies and changing kit, and food. We are good to go.

Aletha, since she couldn't communicate silently the way they could, was staying home with Neenie. If I know her, she's pacing right now. Either that or at the piano. She can't see us off, that would cause too much comment, but I know her thoughts are with us.

Remus turned the key. The truck came to life.

You're the navigator, love. Tell me where to go.

Go to jail, go directly to jail...

As much as I love your sense of humor, this may not be the time.

Sorry. Turn right at the end of the street.

His tummy hurt. His head hurt too, and his arms where Dudley had punched him, but his tummy more than anything. And his head felt funny. All kind of swirly, like he felt after Danger twirled him around and around.

He whimpered a little, thinking of Danger. He wanted her. He wanted her to come to the door and smile at him and pick him up and hold him close. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon never held him like that.

Why didn't Danger come? Why didn't she love him any more? They took him to another lady now, an old lady who smelled funny, and she gave him good stuff to eat like Danger had, but she never cuddled him the way Danger did. And she never played scary wolf chase like Moony, or sang to him like Letha.

His nappy was all wet and messy. It hurt, but he couldn't get it off. And it was dark.

It had been dark for a long time.

He had been alone for a long time.

Remus watched Danger go up the front walk of Number Four. And we don't even need to break in. The Dursleys had given Danger a key, in case they ever needed her to house-sit as well as baby-sit. She had, of course, returned it when she moved.

Or, rather, a magically made copy of it.

This needs to be as free of magic as we can possibly make it. Any magic can be traced to its caster eventually. So it was Danger, not Remus, who would be breaking in, using the original key, and she was wearing gloves so as not to leave fingerprints – or magical traces. She is magical, after all, but she's not used to thinking of herself that way, so she's less likely to do magic casually. As long as she can avoid waking the family, we ought to be –

OH MY GOD! Danger shrieked inside his head. Oh God, oh God, I knew it –

What? Remus demanded, reeling mentally from the force of her shout and dimly noticing the darkening of the street. Get a hold of yourself, you just shattered three streetlights. He forced himself to help her damp down the raw emotional magic she was emanating before he asked the question filling his mind. Is he all right?

He's alive, she answered grimly. They didn't kill him. And that's ALL I can say. Oh God, Harry, I'm so sorry... Her mind-voice went on, cooing to the boy, as Remus tried to control the wave of horror/nausea/anger she was now broadcasting.

The only problem was, she had opened her eyes to him, so that he could see what she saw, and the sight was not conducive to control.

Harry was lying on his side in a battered crib in the cupboard under the stairs. His face was filled with feverish excitement at the sight of Danger, but he seemed too weak even to lift his head. As Danger slipped her arms carefully under him, his shirt lifted up slightly, and Remus saw his ribs in stark relief underneath his skin.

He's got me in a death grip, Danger reported a moment later as Remus struggled to keep himself calm. And he doesn't weigh anything. Which is not a surprise, given how he looks. His nappy is probably half his weight right now – I'd guess it hasn't been changed in at least a day. I'm getting rid of it now. Leave it in the crib for them to clean up. Leave all his clothes, for that matter. They're filthy, and so is he.

A moment's silence ensued, in which time Remus formulated a plan.

To hell with not using magic. This calls for something really drastic. Something to send a message. And I know exactly what to use.

Danger emerged from the house, holding Harry tightly in her arms, wrapped in a blanket. I'll take it back in before we leave, she said. Help me get him cleaned up.

Together, they gave Harry a rough bath with the baby wipes from the changing bag. It would do until they got him home. After Harry was dressed, Remus coaxed him to drink some water and eat a little mashed banana – too much and his stomach would probably reject it, given that he looked as if he hadn't eaten for a day or so, and probably not much then. Danger returned the blanket to the house and locked the door behind her.

I have an idea, Remus said to her, not bothering to hide his anger.

I like the sound of that. Her voice pulsed with answering fury.

Come, stand with me, and say what I tell you to say. Holding Harry cradled against his chest, Remus stood facing the house, and the people in it, the people who had broken a promise, the people who had ignored need, the people who had harmed a child.

Any of those would make this possible. But the last one is the one I think will bind it to them most closely.

Danger came to stand beside him, giving Harry her hand to hold.

“I, Remus Lupin...” he began. Now you state your name, the same way. Your real name.

“I, Gertrude Granger... Lupin...” she added quickly with a smile.

Thank you. Now we speak together. Remus supplied her the words, and they spoke in careful unison.

“... do speak this curse against the man Vernon Dursley and the woman Petunia Evans Dursley. For the crimes they have committed against their honor, against the needy, and against an innocent, I curse them with the Threefold Curse of the Righteous:

“The first curse: That they be punished all their lives for the transgressions of others.

“The second curse: That their greatest desires be always given to others less worthy than they.

“The third curse: That they live out their lives in misery without ever knowing why.

“All that is right and good in the world, I ask you to stand judge. If my cause is just in speaking this curse, let it be visited upon those I have named; but if my cause is unjust, then let the curse return to me in all its power.

“So I speak, so I intend, so let it be done!”

After the last quiet word was spoken, there was a moment of unnatural silence. Everything was waiting, waiting for something to happen...

One of the upstairs windows of Number Four, Privet Drive, flared for an instant with white light.

Remus leaned back against the truck, feeling shaky. I don't believe that worked.

What was that? Danger asked, shivering. I feel tired, somehow.

We just worked magic. Wandless magic. A major curse, usually thought to be only an item of study, impossible to actually cast.

The impossible seems to be our specialty, oh handsome wolf of mine. Wait – you're saying that was an actual curse? It's going to take effect?

Spectacularly. And if we had tried it on someone who didn't deserve it, someone who hadn't done all of this, it would have rebounded on us.

Oh. Danger looked a little ill.

That's why almost no one knows about it anymore. Only Dark wizards usually use curses, and the Dark's not much for just causes.

That's wonderful. Fascinating. We just cast an impossible curse to make the Dursleys' lives a living hell, and we have a hungry and dirty and scared little boy to take care of. Can we go home before I get hysterical, please?

That sounds like a better idea all the time.

Danger got into the back seat of the truck's cab, so she could sit next to Harry and hold his hand. It was the only way they could convince him to let go of Remus.

I have a feeling somebody's going to be very clingy for a while, Danger commented, stroking Harry's face and murmuring soothing nonsense to him.

With good reason. And we're not going to get a babysitter for a long time.

Who needs babysitters? Kid's going to have four parents!

Good point.

Remus started the truck again. Definitely time to go home. And get some sleep. I'm going to need it.

Because tomorrow night... I do the impossible.

Or at least the improbable.

Tomorrow night, I try to break in to Azkaban.

(A/N: OK, this chapter was kind of dark. Sorry if I scared anyone.

Story note: This story grew out of two things I have noticed while reading fanfic and one random thought. First, in almost all Harry/Ginny, Harry/Cho, and Harry/anyone-but-Hermione stories, Harry and Hermione are described as being like brother and sister. That line of thought coincided with my realization that Remus and Hermione act (and look, as Petunia noticed) a lot alike, and (this is totally dorky, but it's true) the thought that "hey, Granger rhymes with Danger. It could be a nickname. Well, not for Hermione, maybe, but what if she had a brother? Or a sister?"

Several mental rewrites later (Danger was originally a trained witch from America, instead of a latent one from Britain), Living with Danger was born. Just for all of you who were wondering, "Where did she get the idea?" Well, now you know.

Thanks for reading, everyone! Love love love those reviews!)

Chapter 8: If It Be Thus to Dream...

The friends of Aletha Freeman knew that her mood on any given day could be accurately judged by the music she chose to play when she went to the piano.

In her Hogwarts days, she had rarely played anything slower than a waltz, except on test days, when she played funeral dirges for her own and her classmates' grades. After Hogwarts, as times grew darker, she added many slow and troubling songs to her repertoire, but the old, happy pieces came out sometimes, as her friends got married and began to have children. She had played at the Potters' wedding and even composed a song for Harry's birth, though she hadn't been able to be there.

It was that song, her own composition, which she played tonight as she waited.

Oh my love, you are my child,

Though you bear another's name.

Whatever you do, all throughout your life,

I'll love you still the same,

And if you should cry, I'll hear you,

And if you should call, I'll come,

For although you were not born to me,

You are my little one.

After what felt like hours, she finally heard the truck pull up and turn off in the front. She controlled herself – she was only supposed to be a friend of the family and their landlady, she couldn't be seen rushing out to greet them. They would come in through their own door, and once it was closed behind them, she could go over to see Harry...

Danger shot through the concealed archway and stopped short. “Do you have anything ugly you want destroyed?” she asked in a poisonously sweet voice.

“Vase on the mantel,” Aletha said promptly, pointing to it. “Hold on a second.”

She pulled out her wand and cast a Silencing Charm on the general area, then nodded to Danger, who stalked over to the mantel and violently smashed the vase on the floor, then very deliberately crushed the pieces under her feet. When the vase was mostly dust, she stepped delicately off it and sat down limply on the sofa.

Aletha lifted the charm. “That bad?” she asked with a sinking feeling in her stomach.

“That bad,” Danger confirmed, staring at the ceiling. “It looks as if they’ve been neglecting him more and more, culminating in simply forgetting him for an entire day. Possibly longer.”

Aletha recast the Silencer on the piano, then slammed her hand down on the keys. Without the noise, it was a touch less satisfying than usual, but it would do. “Curse – them – to – everlasting – darkness,” she said between her teeth.

“Too late,” Remus said with a feral smile, having come in just in time to hear this. “We already did.”

Aletha would have wanted this explained, had Remus not been carrying Harry, who got her whole attention immediately. The little boy was in a fitful sleep, jerking half-awake every few moments. She called his name gently, and his eyes came all the way open. “Letha,” he said sleepily with a smile, and held out his arms to her. Remus handed him over, and she sucked in her breath as she realized how little he weighed.

“We’re going to take very good care of you, Harry,” she murmured to him as she held him close and rocked him. “We’ll never ever let this happen again.”

Danger heaved a sigh. "He needs a bath," she said, standing up. "And then something to eat, and then bed."

"Should we put him to bed alone, though?" Remus asked. "I don't think we should leave him alone for long. Or at all, if we can manage it."

"I suppose I could take him in my bed," Aletha said doubtfully. "But he might roll out."

"No, I was thinking of something else," Remus said. "Suppose we all sleep down here for a while. Bring the mattresses down and make a nest, a den maybe, on the floor. The children can sleep in the middle, and the adults on the outside."

Danger nodded. "It makes sense. We need to make as much of Harry's life as possible the opposite of what he had with the Dursleys. So, any time they left him alone, we have to give him contact."

"I like it," Aletha said, still rocking Harry. "Do you want to bathe him, Danger, and Remus, you and I can get started on that?"

The mattresses were duly levitated down the stairs, with blankets, sheets, and pillows intact. Aletha dressed for bed, in her "sensible" pajamas, while Remus transferred Neenie from her crib to the newly built den, on the floor in front of the Whites' fireplace. Danger and Remus changed into nightclothes while Aletha fed Harry, and then they were all ready for bed.

Aletha had never shared a bed before, except with Sirius, and that hadn't been all that common an occurrence. And he'll be here with us in two days, she thought with a quiet sigh of contentment, idly stroking Harry's hair as the little boy snuggled against her. This is turning into my dream life.

Well, minus the whole "hiding from the world" bit, but you can't have everything.

Sharing her sleeping space with people she considered as brother, sister, niece, and almost-son, instead of being the oddity she expected, was strangely soothing. Almost as if she was rediscovering something from her childhood, something she didn't remember she'd done...

Quietly, she hummed.

Yes, if you should cry, I'll hear you,

And if you should call, I'll come,

For although you were not born to me,

You are my little one...

Her eyes drifted shut on the peaceful scene of Neenie cuddled against Danger, with Remus' arm over them both. Harry's breathing against her side was deep and even. She was breathing with him, breathing in time, in the same time as everyone else... Danger blinked awake. Where am I?

Oh. That's right. We're denning. So Harry doesn't feel abandoned.

She looked down and almost laughed. The children were entangled in the middle of the mattresses, Neenie's non-thumb-sucking arm across Harry's chest, Harry's leg over Neenie's. They're darling. We should do this more often.

What time is it? She squirmed out from under Remus' arm and checked the clock. Uh-oh.

"Letha, wake up," she said aloud.

"Whaa?" Aletha said sleepily.

"You only have 45 minutes. You're going to be late."

“Fine, I’m up.” Aletha sat up and looked around her in confusion for a moment, before memory kicked in. “Oh yeah. Sleeping on the floor, right. I need a shower.” She stood up, stretched her back, and hurried apparently through the wall, where Danger knew the archway was.

“Do I have to be up too?” Remus asked from behind her.

“Yes. We should be on the road pretty soon. But you can sleep in the car. And that reminds me, we have to give Neenie that potion.”

“Right.” Remus yawned, then sat up. “I’ll get it.”

Aletha had brewed a time-related sleeping potion that would make Neenie sleep for 48 hours without harming her. Danger hated to do that to her sister, but it was necessary, because she and Remus had to take her with them on two day-long car rides and one night in between.

And she doesn’t like being in her car seat all that much anyway. She’d be pitching a major fit by the end of it all, and we really don’t need that. But there’s no way to leave her here – there’s no one to watch her – and besides, she makes us that much more plausible.

After all, who would go to pick up a dangerous murderer with two toddlers in car seats?

Harry couldn’t take the potion – there was no telling what it would do to his weakened system – but he wouldn’t need it. As long as he got food into him at regular intervals, little and often, and had people around him at all times, he would probably sleep the next two days away with no trouble.

And now I need to get up and get going.

Because today is the day in between the two most illegal nights of my life.

It was always dark. There were just times when it was darker than other times.

There were only three things to do: pace, concentrate on the truth, and listen to everyone else scream.

Well, four things.

Wondering when I'm going to be screaming too. That's taking up more of my time lately.

Sirius Black stared idly at the small patch of light he knew was the high, barred window on the door of his cell. Looks like moonlight. Maybe it's full moon tonight.

Although he knew that once full moons had been his favorite times, he couldn't recall with any clarity the things he and the other Marauders had done. Those were good memories, and the dementors had taken them first of all.

Well, not first. He knew which two memories he had lost first, but he couldn't remember which had preceded the other. Theoretically, dementors stole the best memories from one's mind first, followed by those which weren't quite so good. So the first memory he'd lost should have been the best moment of his life.

It was either my first kiss with Aletha or the first time I held Harry. I'm not sure which.

He could remember that those things had occurred, but he couldn't remember them occurring. It was maddening.

And that's the point of Azkaban, isn't it.

He turned to item one on his schedule: pace. The cell was four paces long by three and just over a half paces wide. He knew it far, far too well.

And I've only been here... Merlin, I've lost track. How could I lose track? But it hasn't been long. The Crouch boy died not too long ago.

He growled. Crouch got only what he deserved. Bastard. I hope his life explodes in his face.

The phrase brought up the memories he did have left. Stumbling down a dust-choked street, seeing the odd green haze hovering over the ruined house, and knowing in that instant, knowing that his actions, his words had doomed his friends, knowing that by trying to save the Potters, he had killed them...

He tried to defend himself. I was not the traitor. I was never a Death Eater. It was Peter, Peter all the time...

But it's still my fault, my fault they're dead, my fault Harry's an orphan... some godfather I am, can't even care for him... he'll never know me, except as the man who's the reason he doesn't have a family...

A grating sound intruded on his thoughts.

What...

Someone's pulling the bolt. Someone's pulling the bolt on my door, to open it. It can't be time to eat again already, it's the middle of the night! What's going on?

The only reason the dementors would come in here is if orders had come through about me. Orders to send me back to the mainland – not bloody likely – or...

His blood chilled. Orders to Kiss me...

The door swung open. Moonlight spilled onto the floor of the cell.

Sirius stayed where he was, in the opposite corner. I'm not making it any easier than it has to be. You'll have to come and get me.

Then he saw what was standing in the doorway, and he forgot his fear in befuddlement.

What the...?

Four legs. Fur. And unless I'm mistaken, awfully familiar-looking eyes...

It is official, I have lost it. I am now hallucinating.

Funny, though, I never thought I'd hallucinate about Moony first, before, say, James or Lily or Harry... and certainly not Moony in were-form...

Wait a second. He's a werewolf, I'm a human. I'm defenseless here. He should be attacking me. Instead, he's... Sirius squinted against the light, which, though not strong, was more than his eyes were used to. What is he doing?

The werewolf was drawing a paw across the top of its snout, rubbing against its eyes.

I have never seen him behave like this. Ever.

Chalk up another mark for hallucinations.

But hallucination or not, I should probably go canine here... I'd rather not even think I'm a werewolf, and he's probably going to attack me any minute...

He transformed into Padfoot and moved cautiously forward, holding himself in the posture of friendly submission. Please don't attack; I mean no harm, he was saying in the language of animals, which was crude and mostly gestural, but sufficed.

The werewolf came towards him. Packmate, it said in the same way. Follow me.

Packmate? Now I know I'm hallucinating. Moony hates me, he thinks I sold out Lily and James... he'd never call me packmate, it's the closest thing wolves have to blood-brothers.

Still, he followed the werewolf out of the cell and watched as it carefully closed the door and slid the bolt back into place. He followed it down the halls, avoiding the dementors on their gliding rounds, and

out between the bars on the outside of the building. Hallucination or not, this is interesting. First really interesting thing that's happened in... six months. A little less.

Hey, I remembered. That's strange. My mind ought to be getting more messed-up, not clearer...

The werewolf climbed carefully down the rocky slope to the ocean. Sirius followed.

We swim, the werewolf said/showed. Follow me. Our mates, our cubs, our den. Safer together. Come.

Sirius nodded hesitantly. That water's going to be bloody cold... but in dog form, I might be able to handle it. And if we can make it to land...

What am I thinking? This isn't real! There's no way it can be real!

The werewolf growled. Come, it repeated in no uncertain tones.

On the other hand, if it's not real, there's no harm in giving it a shot.

I will come, he said.

The werewolf snorted. The words attached, had it been human at the moment, would have been, Well, finally!

Sirius waded in, the werewolf next to him, and began to swim. The North Star was behind them and to their right, he noticed. That was good, at least... he knew Azkaban was far to the north of the British Isles, but he had no idea how far. Or in what other directions.

I hope he knows where he's going.

Remus Lupin swam steadily, his eyes fixed on the ocean ahead. There, for only him to see, glowed a silver stream of light, leading him towards his beloved.

Sirius swam a bit awkwardly at first, until he got used to it. Moony's usually not all that coherent on his transformation nights. This is the most lucid I've ever seen him.

He sighed. And that would be because this is... right, Sirius. A hallucination. Or a dream.

In the back seat of a locked truck near the shore in Scotland, a woman slept between two car seats, holding the hand of one of the children. Her eyes moved behind her closed lids.

Sirius sneezed as a little water went up his nose. So what did he say? "Our mates, our cubs, our den"? What's that supposed to mean? I don't have any mate – well, maybe Aletha counts, but somehow I don't think she'd still be interested in me.

Aletha Freeman closed the door wearily behind herself and turned on the light. She dropped her own slender rosewood wand onto the table beside the door, followed by a sleek mahogany wand, and sought the comfort of her music.

And cubs. I don't have any kids, either, human or canine. At least, I shouldn't. I suppose, if you stretch a point, you could call Harry mine... but it's not as if I'm going to get my hands, or paws, or whatever, on him at any point in the near future.

The child holding the woman's hand stirred, then relaxed again, settling into a new position. The moonlight turned his black hair silvery.

So, overall, this is totally impossible, crazy, and not really happening, Sirius concluded. But I like it. I wish it were really happening.

His legs registered a protest. He hadn't been this active in a while, and he could feel it. This would be a really bad place to get a cramp.

He risked a look over his shoulder. They must have been swimming for longer than he thought. The island was completely out of sight.

You know, even the mad ones never sound happy, he thought idly, to keep his mind off his legs. Even the prisoners who go totally bonkers don't get to go somewhere good in their minds. No one's happy in Azkaban, not even the nutters.

But this makes me happy. The thought of having a friend come and find me, of having even the possibility of a way out... that makes me happy. Even if it's not real, it makes me happy.

No one's happy in Azkaban. And I'm happy.

He shrugged. I guess I'm just going mad a different route than most. Neenie slept on, unable, at this time in her life, to articulate the sentiment, "Most wizards haven't got an ounce of logic."

So, if I'm going mad, at least I can choose what I want to hallucinate. How about Aletha, playing the piano? Something pretty, like she always used to play.

Aletha looked at her hands in surprise as they began something of their own accord. It was a piece by Bach, part of his "Well-Tempered Clavier" series, a simple and repetitive song that almost all piano students learned. The gentle up and down rhythms of the music made her think of waves, of swimming...

This is for them, out there on the ocean. This is to bring them safely home.

She lost herself in the sweep and sway of the note patterns, living only in the moment, existing only to play the next phrase, and the next, and the next...

Lovely, lovely. Even has a rhythm I can swim to.

Listening to the music, Sirius didn't notice the pain in his legs diminishing.

Remus sniffed. The scent of land was there, he could even see it faintly – but still too faint. And the moon was setting fast.

We're not going to make it. Oh, Danger, my love, this is what I was afraid of...

In her sleep, Danger smiled. One hand rose and made a pulling motion.

The song wound to a close with a crashing chord.

Remus felt the water rush past him as a strange force pulled him forward.

His front paw touched bottom.
Sirius banged his paw and yelped.

Land? We're on land?

When did that happen?

Well, now, I guess...

The werewolf was climbing slowly out, sodden and shivering. Sirius followed him, moved a little way down the shore, and shook. Hard.

He suddenly felt about ten pounds lighter, with all the water out of his coat. He also felt very tired.

He sat down, then lay down. The ground was rather rocky, but that didn't matter so much.

Feels good. I could sleep for a week. Well, a couple days, anyway. I'd need to wake up to eat.

The werewolf bounded off into the trees. Sirius watched him go, mildly baffled. Where's he off to in such a hurry? Not my problem, but I'm curious...

His eyes closed, and he let them. I can be curious when I wake up. Right now, I'm just tired.

Remus reemerged from the edge of the forested area, wand in hand. Sirius was still where he had been, but now he was sound asleep.

Probably better to leave him that way, at least until he's a little more, ah, socially acceptable, Remus mused, and Stunned his friend. A gentle Cleaning Charm took care of a great deal of the problem, and once he'd transformed Sirius back to human, a Shaving Charm worked wonders. He managed to get most of the tangles in Sirius' hair below ear level, then carefully cut off the tangled portion. Finally, he Vanished Sirius' tattered robes and redressed him.

Good thing I'm used to this. Sirius had gone on a bender almost every two weeks during his seventh year at Hogwarts. Since James had been one of his usual drinking partners, Remus had been their designated "put-to-bed-person".

Well, time to wake him up. Remus pulled over the small picnic basket he'd brought with him. We'll have breakfast, then go to meet Danger.

I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do...

(A/N: Can anyone tell me the source of the chapter title? Special mention if you can!

Love and thanks to everyone!)

Chapter 9: A Good Name

Sirius stirred. Someone was calling his name, but he didn't want to move. He was comfortable where he was...

Well, not that comfortable. There's a rock sticking in my back. So I might as well wake up.

Something was wrong, but he couldn't quite place it.

He opened his eyes. Moony was sitting beside him, smiling at him. "Good morning," he said cheerfully. "I wasn't sure you were ever going to wake up."

"G'morning." Sirius sat up slowly and took in his surroundings. They were on a rocky beach, with the ocean to one side and trees to the other. It was somewhat chilly, but he was warmly dressed, and the sun was shining, so it wasn't too bad.

As more of his brain warmed up, though, the feeling of "something wrong" intensified.

"Would you like something to eat?"

Good, an easy one. "Yes. What is there?"

"I brought some rolls, and some jam for them, and there's tea."

"Tea sounds good to start with."

Remus took a thermos out of a picnic basket beside him and unscrewed the lid, pouring the contents into two mugs. "You like it straight, right?"

"Right." Sirius accepted a mug and watched his friend drop four sugar cubes into his own. "How can you drink it like that?"

"I've often wanted to ask you the same question." Remus stirred his tea gently, apparently intent on it.

Sirius took a sip of the hot liquid, which did not – quite – scald his tongue. He set down the cup –

– and remembered everything.

The last six months poured through his head in a few seconds, leaving him gasping.

The Fidelius Charm, Halloween, James and Lily dead, Harry gone, Peter – the stinking, rotten, dirty traitor – and then Azkaban...

Last night. It was real. It was Moony, we did escape!

No, it can't have been. I'm mad. This is just more hallucinations...

"This can't be happening," he blurted.

"Why not?" Remus asked, lowering his teacup, quiet but intense.

"No one escapes from Azkaban. No one ever has. It's impossible."

"Tell me what you think happened last night."

"Nothing. Nothing happened, because nothing could have happened. I'm mad, this is all a delusion. I'm still back in my cell, probably screaming like all the rest of them now. I used to wonder, you know. I used to think about when I'd start screaming like the rest, and now I know. It's right now, this minute, because this can not be happening!"

"If it was," Remus said, still quietly. "If this was happening. You say it's not, I'll accept that for the moment. But if it was. What would you want to ask me? You've been cut off from the world for six months. Is there something, or someone, you want to ask about?"

Sirius rubbed his face, feeling the unusual smoothness. When did I get shaved? Of course, in a dream things happen instantaneously.

Well, I guess I'll play along. If I'm mad, there's nothing I can do about it, and even news I invent myself is welcome at this point.

"Harry," he said finally. "Tell me about Harry. Where is he? Who's taking care of him? Is he all right?"

Remus smiled wryly. "Do you want the answer as of now, or as of two days ago?"

"Is there a difference?"

"Yes. Yes, there is definitely a difference." Remus sighed. "You always did have the gift for picking the hard ones, Padfoot."

Well, I wasn't expecting this... "Let's start with now and work backwards. Where is Harry, right now, to the best of your knowledge?"

"About a half-mile that way." Remus pointed into the trees. "Asleep in his car seat, waiting for us."

Sirius smiled. Real or not, that's a lovely phrase. "Waiting for us." Us, including me... "I hope there's someone with him, or did you just leave him in the car alone?"

"No, there's someone there. Someone he knows. An adult."

"Do I know this person?"

"No, you don't, but I hope you'll like her."

"Oh-ho, it's a her, is it? Are the two of you just friends, or is there something more going on here?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

"Yes."

Remus extended his left hand, grinning. He was wearing a broad gold ring on his fourth finger.

“That’s a wedding ring,” Sirius said. Then the obvious corollary hit him. He gaped at his friend. “You didn’t.”

“I did. Her name is Gertrude but she goes by Danger, she has a little sister just Harry’s age, and she’s the one responsible for all of this.”

“Well, congratulations,” Sirius said, ignoring the last clause of the sentence. Somehow I don’t think she’s responsible for me going out of my mind. “When did this happen?”

“Two weeks ago. But we got off topic. We were talking about Harry.” Remus looked grave. “Padfoot, I won’t lie to you. He looks awful. You might be a little shocked when you see him.”

“Why? What happened to him?”

“He’s been living with Lily’s sister.”

“With...” Sirius had to think hard to remember her name. “Petunia? The Muggle? I didn’t think she even acknowledged Lily. Why on earth would she take Harry in?”

“He was, more or less, dumped on her doorstep. And she treated him that way. Like garbage.” Remus scowled. “He slept in a cupboard, and they would sometimes ‘forget’ to feed him. He’s going to be all right now that we have him, but he’s not strong, physically or emotionally, at this point.”

Sirius shook his head in disbelief.

Dammit, I wouldn’t make up something like that. Not for Harry. Not for my Harry.

Could this be real after all?

Remus went on. "Also, I had no idea where he was, because no one would tell me."

"What? Why not?"

"I was informed that it would not be in Harry's best interests for me to visit him," Remus said bitterly. "Translation, they were afraid I'd steal him." He chuckled suddenly. "Which, ironically, is exactly what we did two nights ago, Danger and I."

"How did you find him?"

"As our former Head of House would say," Remus imitated Minerva McGonagall, "'sheer dumb luck.' "

"What did you do, see him in the park?"

"Yes, actually. Just about a month ago. Which is also how I met Danger. She was babysitting him."

"So let me get this straight. You married a woman you've only known for a month, because she baby-sat for Harry?"

"No, you idiot, I married her because I love her," Remus retorted, shoving Sirius' shoulder lightly. "But without her, you would still be in Azkaban, and I might well be dead." His face, which had been animated when he talked about his wife – Moony with a wife. That is going to take some getting used to – became flat and almost expressionless. "The day I met her, I was contemplating suicide."

"Suicide? You?"

"I had nothing left, Sirius. Everyone I loved was gone. Or so I thought." Remus closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them, his face returning to normal. "Then I found Harry again, and met Danger, and she managed to turn my life upside down within two days."

“Women tend to do that,” Sirius said, smiling as the thought of dark fingers on white piano keys drifted across his mind.

“Oh, you have no idea,” Remus said with an answering smile, and proceeded to rectify that.

Latent magic, he says. Everyone knows that’s just a theory, and a tenuous one at that. True-dreaming, maybe, though it’s very rare – I mean, how else could he have known about me and Peter – but werewolf taming? Sharing dreams, knowing each other’s lives? It’s impossible, it’s unbelievable...

But isn’t there just the outside chance it might be true?

“Anything else you want to know?” Remus asked.

“Yes. Explain that little remark you made last night. The one about ‘our mates, our cubs.’ I don’t have a mate.”

“Now whose finger was I supposed to measure around and not tell her why?” Remus said innocently.

“That’s unfair, Remus. You think she’s going to say, ‘Oh, all right, I believe you, even though no one else in the world does and all the evidence is against you’?”

“Yes,” Remus said simply. “Because she does believe it. She’s been part of this almost from the beginning – she got us our safe place to go – and you should have seen her face when we told her the truth, Padfoot. She looked as if she’d just been let off a death sentence. Something like you do right now.”

A knot of emotion was building in Sirius’ chest. He closed his eyes and thought hard.

I need something tangible. Some real evidence one way or another. I want to believe this so much... but it’s like going straight from hell into heaven, and if it’s not real I’m just setting myself up for a fall. I need to see, or hear, or feel, something I wouldn’t be able to make up...

“I want to see Harry,” he said abruptly. “I need to see him. Can we go to him, right now?”

“Of course.” Remus got up and dumped the rest of his tea out on the rocks. Sirius, about to do the same, thought better of it and drank the rest of his. It was cold, but still tasted good. He handed his mug back to Remus.

“Let’s go,” he said.

The blue truck was parked in a small clearing at the end of a packed dirt trail. Sirius shifted back to human as they got closer, but hung back a bit. He felt unaccountably nervous.

Remus glanced back and sighed. “Sit down,” he said, conjuring a chair. Sirius obeyed, staring at the ground and wondering idly where his wand was...

Probably snapped by now, considering who I am, or at least who everyone thinks I am...

I’ve changed a lot. I probably look frightening. What if I scare Harry? Moony said he was emotionally unstable, what if I do something to him, something he can’t recover from? I’m bad luck, I curse everything I come across, I should leave, now, before anything else happens to people I care about...

“Harry, wake up,” said Remus’ voice from right in front of him.

Sirius looked up. Harry was stirring in Remus’ arms. As Sirius watched, those huge, adorable green eyes opened and looked trustingly at Remus. “Mooney,” Harry said, and nestled a little closer.

Sirius felt a wave of jealousy. Harry loves Remus, I should just go... he doesn’t want me...

“Harry, who’s that?” Remus asked, shifting the boy around so that he was sitting up and facing outwards. Facing Sirius.

Too late now. Sirius tried to smile. Harry was staring at him as if he were a difficult puzzle. "Hi, Harry," he said, feeling almost shy. "Remember me?"

Almost as soon as he spoke, Harry's face cleared and he squealed with glee. "Pa-foot!" he all but shouted. "I go Pa-foot!"

"See, he knows you," Remus said, smiling, though his eyes looked suspiciously bright. "And he wants you. Here."

He set Harry carefully on Sirius' lap and walked away. Sirius had no idea where he went. From the moment Harry entered his arms, the child was the focus of his world.

"Just like the day you were born," Sirius murmured to his godson, holding him tight. Harry was sitting on Sirius' lap with his arms and legs around Sirius and his head against his godfather's chest. Sirius eased back on his hug, and Harry leaned back against his arms, giggling, to look up into his face.

"The first time I ever saw you, you stole my heart, little one," he said. And now you're giving it back to me. You are so beautiful, who could help but love you...

"Do you want to hear a story, Harry?"

Harry nodded.

"All right. This is the story of the day you were born..." Sirius Black entered the lobby of St. Mungo's at a run. "Maternity Ward?" he asked the startled Welcome Witch.

"First floor," she said, "but..."

He lost the rest of her sentence as he charged toward the stairs, up one flight, and out into the hallway, where he repeated his question to a Healer. "Around the corner to the right, but there's security there for some reason," the woman said. "They're questioning everyone before they let them in, just so you know."

“Thanks,” Sirius said, relieved. Wonder if they’re both in there? Probably. Save time and personnel. Besides giving the ladies company.

He went at a slightly more sedate pace around the corner to the right and saw Emmeline Vance standing in the corridor outside the door. “Oh, Sirius, there you are,” she said, beaming at him. “James said he’d firecalled you, but I didn’t expect you so soon...”

“Well, it’s not every day I’m a godfather, is it?” Sirius asked, grinning. “Be a sport, Emmy, boy or girl? James wouldn’t tell me.”

“Well, if he wouldn’t, neither should I,” she said firmly. “You’ll have to go in and see for yourself.” She shooed him into the room and closed the door behind him.

“Hello, Sirius,” said Alice Longbottom, looking up from her day-old son, whom she and Frank had named Neville. “How are you?”

“Wonderful,” Sirius said. “Is anyone else here?”

“No, you’re the first,” Alice said. “It only happened a few minutes ago, give them time...”

“Sirius!” exclaimed James, appearing around the curtains at the other end of the room. “Get back here, you old dog! Come meet your godson!”

“A boy, then?” Sirius asked, waving at Alice and following James.

“A boy,” Lily answered from her bed, her face almost beatific. She was pale, but in the white hospital gown, she looked like an angel. If angels cradled bundles in their arms. “Here he is.”

Sirius felt as if he could barely breathe. The tiny face inside the blankets was red and rather scrunched-looking, but the hair escaping from under the cap was as black as James’ own, and probably as

messy, Sirius thought. The Potter hair, besides being untamable, was inescapable.

“Want to hold him?” James asked, seemingly unable to stop grinning.

Sirius nodded eagerly, and James lifted the baby from his wife’s arms and placed him ever so delicately in Sirius’.

“He’s so light,” Sirius said in wonder, swaying back and forth where he stood. “So tiny.”

“They’re all tiny when they come out,” Lily laughed.

“And he looks a lot like you, James. Especially like you with a hangover.”

James made a face at his friend. “Does not. He has Lily’s eyes, though. Green as a Welsh dragon.”

“He’ll be a heartbreaker when he grows up,” Lily predicted.

“What’s his name?” Sirius asked.

“Harry,” James answered. “Harry James Potter.”

“Just Harry? Not short for anything?”

James shrugged. “It sounds good, don’t you think? Harry Potter. It’s a good name.”

Sirius looked down at the baby. “Yes. A good name.”

Vaguely he heard the door open and close again, but he was lost in the wonder of the tiny life in his arms...

“I loved you then, and I love you now,” Sirius told Harry. “And I will always love you. My baby, my puppy, my little one...”

His voice failed him as he choked up, holding Harry close. He's really mine now.

And he is really mine.

I've decided. This is real. I'm free.

How else could I be so happy?

He was crying, Sirius realized, and he didn't care. He was simply so happy that he couldn't stop crying.

Harry looked up at him in bewilderment. "Pa-foot, no c'y," he said, touching Sirius' face.

"I have to cry, Harry," Sirius said, smiling at his godson. "But I'm not sad. I'm happy."

Harry looked confused. "No c'y," he repeated, looking as if he might cry in a moment.

Sirius pulled himself together, took a deep if shaky breath, and wiped his face. "All right, Harry. No cry. Better?"

Harry nodded. "I huggy," he said conversationally. "You huggy, Pa-foot?"

Sirius was stumped by the question, but only for a second. "Are you hungry, Harry?"

Harry nodded again eagerly.

"Well, let's see what there is to eat," Sirius said, standing up. "I could stand to eat something myself." It was an understatement. He hadn't eaten since the previous night, and that had been Azkaban food, which was...

Well, better not even to think about it any more, Sirius decided.

In any case, he had been very active since then, and a cup of tea might be nice, but it was not satisfying.

Now where did Moony go?

He carried Harry around the truck and discovered Remus sitting against its other side.

“How are you?” Remus asked, standing up.

Sirius met his friend’s eyes squarely. He saw no deception, no anger, and no hatred. Only friendship, love, and hope.

I never thought I’d see anyone look at me that way again...

“I’m fine,” he said. “Or I will be. Given some time.”

Remus’ shoulders, which had been tense, relaxed, and he smiled broadly. “Welcome back, old friend.”

He pulled Sirius into an embrace, which Sirius returned wholeheartedly, if with only one arm.

I didn’t know it was possible to be this happy.

I have Harry and Moony back... what more could I ask for?

Well, maybe one other person...

Aletha lay sprawled across the mattresses in front of the fireplace, still fully dressed. She had worn herself out playing and worrying, and had finally collapsed at some point early in the morning.

Her hands were protectively curled around the two wands she had brought home the night before.

“You were friends with Letha when you were little?” Sirius asked around a mouthful of roll. He had been introduced to Danger, and he rather liked her. She was canny and just a bit sassy, exactly the kind of girl Moony needed.

“Best friends. The kind that never went anywhere alone,” Danger said, handing Harry another slice of roll. “But then her parents told me she was going away to a special school, and I wouldn’t see her until the summer – and then we moved, and I never did see her again until a month or so ago.”

“But they seemed to have no trouble picking up where they left off,” Remus added, ducking Danger’s smack.

“She did go to a special school, you know,” Sirius pointed out. “Just a little more special than you were probably thinking of at the time.”

Danger laughed, a warm sound that seemed to spread around Sirius and invite him in. “Hogwarts sounds wonderful,” she said wistfully. “I wish I could see it.”

“Someday,” Remus promised, sliding his arm around her waist. “When Harry and Neenie go, we’ll go to visit them, and we can show you all the secret passages.”

“I wish we still had the Map,” Sirius said. “D’you think Filch still has it?”

Danger not having heard about the Marauders’ Map yet, this brought up a round of stories, with the result that it was half an hour later before the group got underway.

“You’d better ride as Padfoot,” Remus said to Sirius, buckling Harry into his car seat. “Safer, in case we just happen to be seen.”

“Hair,” Danger said briskly, getting into the driver’s seat.

“Right – ” Remus pointed his wand first at Harry, then at himself, turning them both into blonds.

“You look weird,” Sirius said.

“I can look weirder.” Remus pulled a pair of glasses from his pocket and put them on. “Meet John White,” he said. “Muggle neighbor of Aletha Freeman. His wife, Kelly – ” Danger waved sweetly. “And their twins, James and Jane.”

“And now the family has a dog?” Sirius asked, feeling a smile start on his face.

“Yes, their devoted dog Padfoot.”

Sirius’ smile grew into something resembling a grin. “A good name for a dog.”

“I think Padfoot will probably be adopting Ms. Freeman at some point in the very near future,” Remus said musingly.

Sirius, already in dog form, nodded fervently, panting just a trifle exaggeratedly and making Danger laugh again.

He hoisted himself into the car. Danger had thoughtfully padded the edge of Harry’s car seat, which was really more like a booster seat, with the picnic blanket they had used, so he could lie comfortably with his head next to Harry and the rest of him on the back seat.

Time to go home.

“Time to go home,” Danger echoed his thought, and turned the key in the ignition.

The phone rang in Aletha’s side of the house, startling her out of her sleep.

It’s morning – it’s the morning! They must be calling to tell me how it went!

She hurried through the archway and down the hall, into her own kitchen, and snatched up the phone. “Hello?”

“Aletha? It’s Kelly.”

“Kelly, it’s good to hear your voice.” Aletha hoped she didn’t sound too eager. “How is everyone?”

“Just fine. Everyone is great. And we’re all on our way home. We’ll see you tonight.”

Aletha took a shaky breath. “Give everyone my love,” she said in a voice that only trembled a very little. “I’ll see you all tonight.”

“Will do. Bye.”

The phone went dead.

Aletha hung up the phone and sank into a chair, feeling as if her head would split if she smiled any more widely.

Tonight, tonight, she caroled inside her head. I’ll see my love tonight...

Not even realizing that she had only 20 minutes to get ready for work could dampen her mood.

(A/N: Just so you all know – I love this story. I don’t write it so much as I watch it – it unfolds like a movie inside my mind, complete with soundtrack, and I have to try to get it across to you. And sometimes there are multiple ways a scene can turn out, and I have to pick the one I like best and the one that will work the best – it’s so much fun! I truly love it!

Byot, by the way, is my (I believe, do let me know if I’m wrong) new coinage for a sad, excessively happy, or otherwise tearjerky passage or chapter. Stands for "Bring Your Own Tissues". So if you see "Byot warning" on my summary, grab the Kleenex!

To everyone: Hearts and hugs! Next update might be a little while, I have to do some real-life work... but I will not abandon you!)

Chapter 10: Simple Stuff

Danger hung up the phone, climbed back into the truck, and shut the door. "Letha sends her love," she said to the car in general, buckling her seat belt. "Can I put the radio on?"

"Not too loud, please," Remus requested.

Sirius nodded in agreement, carefully, because Harry had a hold of one of his ears. His tail was across Neenie's lap, and her free hand was resting on it. She's a cutie, but she can't hold a candle to my Harry.

Hope she likes me.

Danger fiddled with the buttons and dials for a moment, finally coming up with something not too annoying, and stepped on the gas.

Sirius yawned, settling his head into a more comfortable position. The opening bars of a new song caught his attention slightly, and as he listened, he felt himself relaxing. The rhythm was compelling without being too forceful, and the woman's voice was wistfully sweet. She sang about seeing this guy at the bar, wondering if he remembered her...

The truck turned onto a major road and accelerated, the wheels seeming to turn in time with the music as it picked up for the chorus. The singer expressed her wish to get to know the object of her affection.

Remus was already asleep, his head against the window. Harry's grip relaxed as he fell more deeply asleep. The singer didn't want to get too hyped, whatever that meant...

Danger glanced in the rearview mirror with a fond smile.

But she thought the simple stuff would be nice...

Sirius slipped into the first real sleep he'd had since November, and dreamed of Aletha.

It was just a normal day in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Amelia Bones, Second Assistant Head of the Department, had eaten her lunch and was working on her usual afternoon task.

Reading reports.

Merlin, how she hated reports some days. It seemed as if half the Aurors couldn't write a simple paragraph, and the other half couldn't even formulate a sentence correctly. She often had to resist the temptation to load her quill with red ink, correct their spelling and grammar, and send the reports back until they wrote them better.

But no, my job is to read them, summarize them, tag them in order of importance, and send them up the chain. And only that. No thoughts or comments of my own.

One of these days, we are going to choke on our own bureaucracy around here.

She sighed, and rang for her secretary. "Ms. Freeman, these are finished. The usual procedure, please."

"Yes, ma'am." Aletha gathered the reports up in her arms. She would make two copies of each of them, file one herself, and send the other two up the chain, one to the Assistant Head of the Department and one straight to the Head.

That's if we don't choke on parchment first.

Lars Vilias, Assistant Head of the Department and her immediate superior, burst through the door, making Aletha jump and flatten herself against the wall. "Amelia!" he almost shouted. "Word's just come through – have you heard – it's awful – "

"Calm down and tell me what it is, man," she directed, sighing inwardly at his tendency to exaggerate. Probably a minor breach of security somewhere, some Muggle saw an undisguised hippogriff...

“Sirius Black has escaped!”

All right, maybe not so minor.

Aletha made a strangled noise. Madam Bones, looking over at her, saw her normally unflappable secretary clutching the reports in her arms as if they were her salvation, her face frozen in what must be fear. “Pull yourself together,” she snapped. “This goes no farther, Ms. Freeman.”

“Y-yes, ma’am.” Aletha walked a touch unsteadily out of Madam Bones’ office. Amelia watched as the woman deposited the reports on her own desk, then hurried around the partition and down the hall in the direction of the restrooms. Probably someone crying in there every day of the week. No one will notice her.

“The Daily Prophet already knows,” Vilius hissed at her. “We have to do something – we have to figure out who to assign, where to search, what to tell people – ”

“The first thing we need to do is calm down,” Amelia said as sternly as she could. “Panic never helped anything.”

Though there are times when it feels like a very good idea. Aletha shoved through the restroom door, ran into an empty stall, and began to laugh and cry at the same time.

It’s real.

It’s really happening.

And it’s happening today, right now.

Oh, Sirius, Sirius...

She began to compose herself. As long as they can get safely home, we’re free and clear. So the greatest danger is between now and

tonight. And part of the danger lies with me – we'll be just as caught if I give us away...

I'm lucky – excited is easy to mistake for scared. Excited people make mistakes and break things the way scared people do. Just remember, Letha, until he walks through that door tonight, you're petrified of him.

But after he does...

She spent ten blissful seconds – all she would allow herself – lost in thoughts of Sirius, of his smile and his walk and the way he kissed her...

No more of that, now. He's a traitor and a murderer, and although not many people know it, you loved him once, and you're frightened out of your wits that he might want revenge. That's your story, now stick to it!

Straightening her robes, she swept out into the office again. Late that afternoon, Danger swore.

"What's wrong?" Remus asked sleepily, opening his eyes.

"Police. We're being pulled over."

In the mirror, she saw Sirius stiffen.

"Just stay calm," Remus said soothingly. "It's probably something routine."

Do you really believe that?

No, but it's what Sirius needs to hear. He's liable to panic right now, and he does really stupid things when he gets panicky.

Danger brought the truck to a halt on the shoulder of the road. The policeman walked up to her open window. "Good afternoon, ma'am. Sorry to interrupt your trip, but we've had word that a dangerous

criminal's escaped, and we were wondering if you'd seen him." He handed her a photograph.

It was recognizably Sirius, but only just. He seemed to have several months' worth of beard and be extremely grimy, and he was scowling at the camera. She got the feeling the picture had been frozen, by whatever magical authorities had passed it along, at his most threatening expression.

"I haven't seen anyone who looks like this," Danger said. "Darling?"

Remus shook his head. "Sorry, can't help you."

"Are you certain?" the policeman asked. "Because we've had a tip that he might be hiding in a vehicle of this description. Do you mind if we search a bit?"

"Not at all." Danger climbed out and stretched her back, allowing the two officers to poke around in the cab. Sirius growled slightly at them as they checked under the back seat.

"Padfoot!" Remus snapped from the passenger side, where he too had got out and was standing. "My apologies, officers. He's very protective of the children."

"Well, he's not here," the first policeman said, shrugging, as his colleague climbed out of the truck. "Sorry to have inconvenienced you, sir, ma'am. Have a pleasant day."

"Thank you, we will," Danger said, firmly suppressing her giggle reflex.

We'll have to do anti-scrying spells around the house and truck, Remus said. That's probably how they caught on to us.

What, they said, "Show me where Sirius Black is", and they saw my truck?

Basically. But they can't see much detail, so they couldn't see inside it. And since they don't know about his dog form...

They assumed he was under the seat or something, and some stupid Muggle family hadn't even noticed?

The police car pulled past them, and Danger could finally allow herself to laugh.

"And you know the best part?" she said finally. "I didn't even have to lie. I haven't seen anyone who looks like this." She brandished the photo, which the police had left with them, 'in case you happen to run into him at some point.'

"Nor did I." Remus grinned like a boy who'd stolen the entire cookie jar. "I said I couldn't help them. Which is perfectly true. But you have to learn to control yourself," he said to the back seat.

Sirius whined apologetically.

"Altogether, though, I think we handled that pretty well," Danger said, feeling a surge of giddiness. "Let's go. We're only a couple hours from home."

I need to go home.

It was quitting time at the Ministry, and Aletha had never been more ready.

"Ms. Freeman."

She gasped and whirled around. Madam Bones was standing behind her.

"Sorry," she apologized quickly, breathing hard, one hand pressed to her heart. "I'm just... I guess... a little... on edge. With the news, I mean."

The Evening Prophet had arrived in the office a few minutes ago, with huge banner headlines proclaiming the news and photos of Sirius,

taken during the last inspection of Azkaban, a month ago. He was staring at something off to one side, then turning to the camera and scowling. She could hardly bear to look at it.

He'll be all right when he gets home. He has to be.

"Ms. Freeman, correct me if I'm wrong, but you were once fairly close with Mr. Black."

She nodded, biting her lip.

"If you like, we can assign you some security. An Auror could be spared, I think, to make sure of your safety..."

"No, ma'am, that's all right. He... he never knew where I lived. I always went to his place, never the other way around. I should be safe enough at home."

"You're sure? I would hate to see anything happen to you."

"I'm sure, ma'am."

"Very well. Good night."

"Good night, ma'am." Aletha gathered her things and headed for the lift.

"Ms. Freeman?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

Madam Bones regarded her for a moment.

"Take the remainder of the week off," she said finally. "Owl or firecall if anything happens. I think you need a rest."

Aletha smiled tremulously. "Thank you, ma'am. I'll see you on Monday, then."

“Monday it is.”

In the lift, Aletha allowed herself a grin, for the briefest of moments.

Four. Day. Weekend.

Oh YES!

She quickly reassumed her former demeanor as the lift approached the Atrium. The golden door slid open, and she hurried out and got in line for a fireplace.

“Number 71, Crozer Street,” she said clearly when her turn came, and stepped into the green flames. The Ministry blurred out of sight in the usual spinning rush of Floo travel, and only a moment later, her own music room came into focus as she took a practiced step forward and caught herself on the handgrip she’d installed on the mantel.

Soon. Soon.

They’ll be here soon.

He’ll be here soon.

The refrain seemed to be beating in her heart, moving through her blood. She forced herself to calm down, to move slowly, though everything in her body wanted to shriek wildly for joy. Schooling herself to serenity, she climbed the stairs to her bedroom.

I think a special outfit is appropriate for the occasion...

“Hey.”

Sirius startled out of his sleep. Why was someone shaking him?

“Time to wake up, Sleeping Beauty,” Remus said with a smile.
“We’re home.”

Carefully, so as not to step on Harry, Sirius stood up. It was an unassuming house, painted white, with two front doors and two letter boxes showing it was a duplex. There were probably thousands like it in London alone.

But this one is special.

This one is ours.

Danger lifted out Harry, now awake and looking around interestedly. "Come on, out you come," she said, and Sirius jumped a little awkwardly to the ground. "John, will you let him in, love?"

John? Oh, right, that's Remus. And Harry is James, and Danger is... Kelly, I think? Doesn't matter, I'm not going to be talking to anyone, but it's good to know...

He followed Remus up the steps to the front door on the right. "Go straight back to the room with the fireplace, then make a left," Remus said quietly while getting his keys out. "There's a disguised archway in the wall. Letha's right past that, in her music room. And she's expecting you."

Sirius nodded to show he understood.

Remus opened the door. "Good luck," he said with a wink as Sirius went inside, and shut the door quietly behind him.

Sirius transformed back to human and took a look around. The room had a bit of an unsettled look yet, but it was obvious people lived there. Books were lying on tables rather than being perfectly stacked on the shelves, a few toys were scattered on the floor, and there was a forgotten water glass on the floor beside a chair.

Come on, Sirius, move. They'll be coming in any moment, they don't need to run into you just standing here like an idiot. Besides, there's someone waiting for you, or had you forgotten?

As if on cue, somewhere in the house, a piano began to play what was obviously an introduction.

I know this song. I know I know this song, but I can't think of it...

Sirius moved back through the house, listening, as a woman's voice began to sing. A love song, sweet and tender, from an old movie, the first one he'd ever seen...

Sirius felt the smile coming to his face again. Our song. She's singing our song. This is so perfect.

For one terrible second, he doubted again. No. This is too perfect. It can't be real.

But the song went on, and he knew the singer's voice beyond a shadow of a doubt.

He was at the back of the house, in the room with the fireplace, and the music was louder here.

The archway must be just there, in that blank stretch of wall.

The song moved into the bridge, the singer expressing the timelessness of love.

Sirius felt at the wall. Sure enough, in one place, it simply wasn't there.

He took a deep breath. Here goes nothing...

The singer began the last verse.

Sirius stepped through the arch.

Aletha Freeman, dressed in flowing red, sat at the piano with her back to him, absorbed in the end of the song.

"You are so beautiful," Sirius said softly in the silence that followed her last chord.

Aletha spun around on the bench with a gasp. Her face showed first shock, then joy, joy too great for words. With a sound like a sob, she ran into his arms.

They held each other for a long moment, then kissed, fiercely, hungrily. When they broke apart, Sirius saw that Aletha's cheeks were wet.

"You're crying," he said hoarsely.

"So are you." Aletha smiled even as more tears spilled from her eyes. "I love you so much." She moved to kiss him again, but Sirius put his hand over her mouth.

"I need to look at you," he said. "Just look at you. I need to see your face again."

"Can you look sitting down?" Aletha asked with a shaky laugh. They moved in awkward tandem to the sofa without letting go of one another. Aletha sat first, and Sirius, never taking his eyes from her, sank down next to her.

"I lost your face," he said as he stroked her cheek. "In Azkaban. I lost everything about you. Your eyes, your hands, the smell of your skin and the feel of your hair, everything. All I knew was that you existed, and that once you had loved me, but I knew you would hate me for what you thought I had done."

"I couldn't hate you – because I couldn't stop loving you." Aletha caressed his other hand, twining her fingers with his. "Even thinking about what everyone said you had done, I couldn't stop loving you. Thinking of you as a traitor sent my whole world cockeyed. It was as if someone had told me that now rain fell up and the sun rose in the west, and then locked me away from the sun and the rain so that I couldn't see for myself. I had to believe what I was told."

"Do you still believe what you're told?"

"Depends on who's saying it, and what's said."

“Well, I’m telling you that I love you,” Sirius said, and pulled Aletha towards him for another kiss without waiting for an answer – well, it’s not as if she’s resisting!

“Never leave me, Letha,” he said pleadingly when they came up. “I can’t lose you again.”

“Then marry me.”

“What?”

“Marry me. I want to be your wife. I want to be Mrs. Sirius Black. Please. Even if the world can’t know about it, I want to belong to you, and I want you to belong to me.”

“Well, then, let me do this the right way...” Sirius slid off the couch and down onto one knee. “Aletha Freeman, will you marry me?”

“Sirius Black, I thought you’d never ask.” Aletha smiled broadly, her eyes still wet. “Of course I will.”

“Good, then I can get up.” Sirius returned to the couch, and Aletha cuddled next to him, his arm around her shoulders. “Would you believe I went ring shopping three days before Halloween?” he whispered in her ear.

“You... you mean you were...”

“I was going to ask you in November some time. We could have had a Christmas wedding. Would you have liked that?”

Her answer was not verbal, but it left him in no doubt that she would have liked that very much indeed.

An indefinite but blissful time later, Aletha pulled away. “We can get married as soon as you’re ready,” she said with a smug smile. “I even have a dowry.”

“A dowry?”

“Yes, a dowry. A gift a wife brings to a marriage for her husband. A practical item, for his everyday use...” She was rummaging behind her, but at his chuckle she turned her head back to him. “And get your mind out of the gutter!”

Sirius snickered. “You’re kidding. With an opening like that, I’m not supposed to take advantage?”

Aletha made a face at him. “Take advantage of this,” she said, slapping something into his open hand.

Sirius stared at it. A wand. And a familiar wand...

“Aletha – is this...”

“It’s yours,” she said with no trace of teasing in her voice. “Or it had damn well better be, considering how I got it.”

“I thought they would have snapped it.” Sirius stroked two fingers lovingly along the gleaming length of his own wand, the one he’d had since he was eleven, the only one he’d ever owned.

“I think they would have... except that the Museum of Magical Curiosities offered a fairly large amount of gold for the chance to put it on display, and they simply couldn’t resist. So that’s where it has been, and, to all appearances, where it still is.”

“Pardon?”

“I transfigured a stick to leave in its place. After I distracted the security guard by throwing a rock through another exhibit. It was so easy, it was almost criminal. I was Disillusioned, of course, so he never saw me, and I was wearing gloves, so even if they do the Muggle thing and dust for fingerprints, there won’t be any. And that’s

assuming they ever even find out.” Aletha grinned widely. “So, now we’re both criminals.”

“You are a dangerous woman,” Sirius said admiringly, caressing his wand once more before sliding it into his pocket.

Now I feel like a wizard again.

“Pa-foot?” a small voice said.

Sirius and Aletha looked up to see Harry, supporting himself on the piano bench and looking curiously at them both. “Come here, you little rascal,” Sirius said, holding out his arms.

Harry navigated carefully along the edge of the bench, then launched himself into Sirius’ arms from the corner. “Gotcha!” Sirius exclaimed, swinging his godson up into his lap. “You’re mine, now. And I’m going to... tickle you!”

“No tickle!” Harry shrieked happily, trying to ward off Sirius’ hands. “Letha, no tickle!”

“Stop that,” Aletha said, pulling Harry onto her own lap. “Leave the poor child alone. Let me do it!”

She started tickling Harry herself. He squealed and giggled and shoved at her hands for a moment, until Sirius intervened by squashing both of them in an enormous hug.

“You’re both mine,” he growled playfully. “And I’m never letting you go. Never, ever, ever.”

“Works for me,” Aletha said, smiling. “Unless you mean it literally, in which case Harry’s not the one I’ll be tickling. And I know all your hot spots, Sirius Black.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, trust me, I would.”

Harry was following their conversation, probably not with much understanding, Sirius thought, but certainly with a great deal of interest.

A dull clanging noise made itself heard. "What is that?" Sirius asked.

"That's Danger, banging on a pot with a wooden spoon. It's her way of saying that she thinks we've been snogging long enough." Aletha chuckled. "Or that dinner is ready. Your choice."

"I like the sound of dinner, myself." Sirius stood up, holding Harry. "Which way do we go?"

The meal was simple – hamburgers and baked potatoes with a salad – but Sirius was secretly grateful. Anything more elaborate, he thought, might well have overwhelmed him.

I need some time to adjust to actually having a life again. Simple things are probably better until then.

After dinner, the four of them sat and talked, with Harry going from one lap to another as he wanted and Neenie still asleep in her car seat (the potion she'd been given wouldn't wear off until the morning, Sirius had learned). The others brought Sirius up to date on events in the world, both magical and Muggle. He wanted to see what the Evening Prophet had to say about him, but after he, Danger, and Harry all yawned at precisely the same time, bed was generally decreed to be a good idea.

"After all, it's not like you're going anywhere," Aletha said with a grin as they settled down on the mattresses. "When you wake up in the morning, you'll still be right here with us, where you belong."

Where I belong. Merlin, that's good to hear.

He lay awake for a time, just enjoying the little things he knew he had always taken for granted. The mattress, the pillow, the blanket. The

warmth of Aletha against one side, and Harry against the other. The scent and sound of Remus, Danger, and Neenie, not far away.

There is no way I could mistake this for Azkaban, even in my sleep. Not with everyone here around me. I might not even have nightmares about it.

Maybe this is partly for me, as well as for Harry...

The rhythmic breathing of his sleeping family reminded him of the wheels of the truck on the road, and that reminded him of the song on the radio that morning, the one about simple stuff...

And as Sirius remembered what he had done at that line in the song, he did it again.

Safely hidden from the world and together at last, the family slept in peace.

(A/N: SarahtheBardess, whom I've mentioned before, has graciously agreed to be my beta, and to let me beta for her, and to borrow some of her ideas. We learned to write together, so our styles are similar... if you like me, it's a pretty good bet you'll like her! Give her stuff a try!

So, the family is sleeping, and I need to sleep too. Next chapter: Dumbledore's reaction!)

Chapter 11: What Have You Done?

It was a normal Wednesday at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Students were going to classes, complaining about homework, eating in the Great Hall, practicing Quidditch, and conducting themselves more or less as students had in the halls of Hogwarts for hundreds of years.

The staff, too, was having a fairly normal day.

Most of them, at any rate.

Minerva McGonagall was not.

She had been sitting in her office, reading the essays of her third-year Transfiguration class, when Armando Dippet had come bursting into the portrait of her great-grandmother on the wall and informed her that she was needed in Dumbledore's office. Immediately.

Naturally, she got up at once. One did not refuse the Headmaster of Hogwarts. Especially when that Headmaster used a word like "immediately". It was not a word Albus Dumbledore used lightly.

She gave the password at the gargoyle ("Chocolate Frog") and was transported upwards to the familiar office.

"As I said, Cornelius, I will come as soon as I am able," Albus was saying as she entered the room. He was kneeling by his fireplace, talking with Cornelius Fudge, who seemed extremely upset about something. "Ah, Minerva, please come in." He turned back to the fire. "I will see you in five minutes, Cornelius, if that will do?"

"Of course, of course," said Fudge, sounding highly frazzled. "Do hurry, Dumbledore, this is rather important..."

“I am aware of that,” Albus said with that ever-so-gentle tone in his voice that nonetheless made people listen to him. “Five minutes, Cornelius.”

“Yes... five minutes...” Fudge’s head dithered for a moment, then vanished.

“What in heaven’s name is so urgent, Albus?” Minerva asked in amazement.

“Sit down, Minerva, this news may be a bit unsettling to you.”

Minerva took a seat and waited.

“Sirius Black has escaped from Azkaban.”

Unsettling, he said.

That is a severe understatement.

“How?” was the first word she managed to articulate, after a few moments of simple open-mouthed shock.

“That is what I hope to help determine, Minerva. Cornelius says that the dementors report Black was in his cell yesterday when they brought food, but not today when they did so, and even his best people can find no magical traces of any kind in the cell or on the island.”

“So he had no assistance,” Minerva said, thinking aloud. “No one helped him.”

“Or if he had help, it was non-magical. That is always a possibility.”

“Come, now, Albus, no Muggle could find Azkaban, let alone free a man from it.”

“Perhaps,” Albus said quietly, “but a Muggle guided, or controlled, by a witch or wizard could.”

The Imperius Curse. It floated, unsaid, between them.

An Unforgivable Curse, which only the Darkest of wizards would use. As if we needed any more proof that Black was guilty. Minerva shivered.

Then she had a disquieting thought.

“Albus – does Sirius Black know where Harry is?”

“That is my second order of business, Minerva: to make certain that Harry Potter remains secure in the care of his aunt and uncle. I have had no indications otherwise, and the wards I raised on the house would deny entrance to anyone who wished Harry harm and notify me immediately that such an entrance had been attempted. So I fully expect to find Harry safe at Number Four, Privet Drive.”

Expectations are such dangerous things.

Albus Dumbledore had accomplished his first mission, inspecting Azkaban fortress and the island on which it sat without discovering anything magical except a faint and fading Apparation trace. There was no corresponding Disapparation, which frankly had him baffled. Who would Apparate to Azkaban, and how had they left if not by Disapparation?

Nonmagically, he had noticed odd markings on the bolt of Sirius’ – no, I must not think of him in that way. He is not the man I took him for, and distance is necessary if I am ever to heal from the hurt he dealt me – of Black’s cell, then. They almost appeared to be teeth marks. He had one of the Aurors copy them for further study.

There were also tufts of gray and black fur caught in some of the joints of the bars surrounding the building. He made certain that samples were taken of these as well. Something about this is extremely strange... and I do enjoy a good mystery.

Once satisfied that nothing else could be learned at Azkaban, he had moved on to his second piece of business – a routine check on Harry Potter.

He felt a touch guilty as he stepped onto the Dursleys' property. He had promised Vernon and Petunia, in his letter, that they would be left alone, that no “freaks” would invade their lives.

But this is something of a special occasion. Harry may be in danger, and by extension, their family. They need to know about it, and know now. A letter might arrive too late.

Almost automatically, he cast the magic-viewing spell over the house.

And recoiled, completely stunned.

His wards, so carefully constructed, were simply... gone.

And something else had taken their place.

Dumbledore forced himself to calm. Let me look at this logically. Lack of logic is too often the downfall of wizardkind.

The wards are gone. Not broken, not breached, but gone. What could have caused that to happen?

He pondered a moment, then shook his head in bafflement. Not enough information. Move on to the second problem.

What is that other piece of magic?

Item: it is incredibly complex.

Item: it was cast by two people.

Item: it was cast within the last two days.

Item: like my wards, it affects some person, or persons, within this house.

Item: unlike my wards, it does not involve the house itself.

Item: I have never seen anything like it in my life.

Item: I am wasting time. I came here to check on Harry, and I have not done that.

Something highly unusual has obviously happened here. I must find out what it was.

He rang the Dursleys' doorbell and waited.

"Go away!" shouted a woman's voice from inside. "Whoever you are, go away, I don't want to see you!"

A child began to cry within. "Oh, shut up," the woman's voice snarled, and there was the sound of a slap.

Dumbledore checked quickly behind him to make sure no one was watching, then Apparated into the room where the noises were coming from – the living room of the house, as it happened. Petunia Dursley was sitting on the couch, staring at the wall, while her son Dudley sniveled on the carpet, a red handprint blossoming on one cheek. "How did you get in here?" she demanded, whipping around to face him.

"By magic. Allow me to introduce myself; I am Albus Dumbledore. You may recall the letter I left with your nephew Harry."

"Oh, him." Petunia's flash of annoyance passed, and her voice sank into something of a monotone. "I suppose you want to see him."

"Yes, I would like that."

"Can't oblige you. He's not here."

"Not here?"

“Not here. Gone. Vanished in the middle of the night. Night before last, I think. We’ve had more important things to think about.”

Dumbledore sank into a chair, feeling as if he’d been hit from behind with a Body-Bind.

Gone. The word rang dully in his ears. Gone for more than a day, and I never knew...

Petunia continued without noticing. “What with Vernon not getting his promotion, it should have been his, the other man’s not nearly as good, and then being arrested for assault and battery after he hit his manager...”

She sniffled. “And now he’s been framed for embezzlement... he’s never stolen a thing in his life, not a thing, it couldn’t have been him, and now we’re to be turned out into the street, they’ve taken everything, what will become of my Dudders, ohhhhh...” She broke out into sobs herself, wailing far louder than Dudley had.

Something in Petunia’s litany triggered a response in Dumbledore’s half-numb brain. So much trouble, to fall on them so suddenly. Within the last two days. And undeserved, if she’s telling the truth. I wonder...

“Mrs. Dursley, I believe you have been cursed,” he said.

Or he tried to.

What came out of his mouth was “Is this not a lovely day?”

Petunia ignored him.

He tried again. “Your son seems very healthy” emerged, when he had been meaning to say “Has anyone worked magic in this house lately?”

I cannot seem to ask her, or tell her, about this magic.

And only one working I have ever heard of excludes even the knowledge of itself from its victim.

Vernon and Petunia Dursley have been placed under the Curse of the Righteous.

Who could have done that – and why?

Never mind that now. There is a more important subject at hand.

“Mrs. Dursley, what can you tell me about Harry?” he said loudly, cutting through her sobs.

Petunia looked at him with loathing. “Unnatural brat,” she spat. “Like his parents. Oh, I took him, I didn’t want his death on my hands, if you were telling the truth in that letter, but I wasn’t about to pretend I liked him. And he had to learn. He had to learn his place.”

“What place was that?” Dumbledore asked quietly.

“He had to learn,” Petunia hissed, “that he did not belong here, in our house, with normal people. He was a freak, and he should have been grateful for what he got. But no, that girl spoiled him, and we had to be harsh with him after she left.”

I do not like the sound of this.

But what does a girl have to do with anything, I wonder?

“Harsh with him?” he repeated aloud.

“Yes, harsh.” Petunia’s tone was suddenly defensive. “But we never harmed him. He was always fine, always able to make more trouble, if that’s what you’re after. He could certainly scream loud enough. It took him nearly two hours to stop, the last time.”

“Two hours after you did what?”

“After we shut him up, of course. He was attacking Dudley, there was nothing else we could do.”

“And where, exactly, did you shut him up?”

Petunia’s face contorted. “You’ll have it out of me, one way or another, I’m sure,” she said in disgust. “I might as well spare myself the trouble and just tell you. In the cupboard, there, under the stairs. That was where he slept. And a waste of good space, too.”

Dumbledore pressed his lips together, thinking, with a pang, of the laughing little boy he remembered, alone and frightened in a tiny, dark space...

“When, exactly, did you last see your nephew, Mrs. Dursley?” he asked, intending to fix a precise time before which the abduction could not have happened.

“11 April, the night he tried to rip out Dudley’s hair. Vernon put him in his cupboard, he screamed for nearly two hours, then he quieted down.”

Something doesn’t add up about that...

“11 April? Are you certain?”

“I’m positive, it was a Sunday. Why?”

“I am wondering,” Dumbledore said in his coldest tones, “how you are so sure it was the night of 12 April when your nephew was abducted, since you claim not to have seen him since the previous night.”

“Oh, we heard him,” Petunia said, waving a dismissive hand. “Whimpering in there, all that day, quite annoying really. But he had to learn. He’d been naughty. And we were very busy that day. There just wasn’t time for him.”

Dumbledore restrained himself from attacking the woman with his bare hands.

She has no idea what Harry meant to you, he reminded himself. Or to the rest of the magical world.

Besides, she has already been punished beyond anything you can do. Even you, with all your learning, have never cast the Curse of the Righteous.

Another thought emerged, and to his astonishment, it was tinged with a blush of hope.

No Death Eater would, or could, have cast that curse.

Who with the required nature to cast such an aptly named curse would be interested in cursing the Dursleys so very thoroughly? Whom of a magical nature have they harmed? Only Lily and Harry...

So the curse was cast by someone who cared for Lily, or who cares for Harry, or both.

Would it be beyond hope that the same party – no, parties, there were two, remember – was his abductor?

Perhaps I can pick up some personal traces from the magic.

He rose, then remembered something. It's probably not important, but I admit to some curiosity.

"Mrs. Dursley, you mentioned a girl who 'spoiled' Harry. Who was she, and how did she know Harry?"

"His babysitter. Granger was her name, Gertrude Granger, though she called herself by some foolish nickname, Trouble or Anger or something. She had a sister the boy's age, or so she claimed." Petunia sniggered. "A sister, twenty years younger? She must think we're all fools to believe that."

So that makes this Gertrude about twenty-one. A young adult, not a teen.

“Her parents died last August, I never did find out how it happened. Both at once, though, and it wasn’t a car crash or anything like that – she just came home one day, and there they were, dead...” Petunia shrugged. “She got custody of the girl eventually, she offered to babysit one day, and soon the boy was spending more time with her than he did with us.”

A young woman alone, with a child Harry’s age in her care. And they seem to have bonded. How interesting.

“She was a slut,” Petunia said, savoring the word. “I saw a strange man in her kitchen once – saw her hugging him in public a day or so later. He could have been the father of the girl, they looked quite a bit alike. Then she tells us she’s moving, and not two weeks later, the night before she leaves, she announces she’s married – to a different man. I saw him, too, out in the car waiting for her. He’s a fool if he expects anything from her.”

“Would you recognize the men if you saw them again?” Dumbledore asked, almost automatically.

“Of course. I never forget a face.”

“Excuse me for a moment, please,” Dumbledore said, and stepped into the hallway, where he leaned against the wall and tried not to look at the cupboard door.

I must restrain myself. This situation has the potential to spin far, far out of my control if I lose my grip for one moment.

Stop trying to trick yourself, Albus. It’s already out of your grasp. The best you can do now is damage control.

He cast the magic-viewing spell again. The Curse appeared, looking to him like a tangle of threads, enormously complex and multicolored.

Show me your caster, Dumbledore said to it. Show me who made you.

The tangle began to spin. Out of the whirls of light appeared two faces. One, a young woman with bushy brown hair and a wry smile, Dumbledore did not recognize. The other, he did, and although he had not been expecting it, he realized he should have been.

I am a fool.

He stepped back into the living room. "Mrs. Dursley, only a few more questions, and then I will leave you in peace. Can you tell me who this is?" He cast an image of the young woman in midair.

"That's her," Petunia said, smirking at the picture. "The Granger slut. Probably left the neighborhood when we rumbled her little game."

"And this man, have you seen him before?" Dumbledore displayed the other image the Curse had yielded him.

"He's the one I saw in her house. And she drove away like a bat out of hell the next night, and didn't come back until morning – and he was with her when she did." Her expression indicated she had no trouble imagining what the young woman had been doing that night. "And a black woman, too, someone the boy seemed to know..."

Dumbledore disregarded the last sentence. His mind was too busy grappling with the implications of what he had just learned.

I knew the curse was cast by two people. Now I have their names.

Gertrude Granger.

A young woman with immense magical power, whom I have never met, or even heard about.

And Remus Lupin.

Whom I have met – whom I thought I knew – and who, if I recall correctly, lives not too far from here...

“Thank you, Mrs. Dursley, you have been most helpful. May I wish you better luck in the future.” Not that my wish will do any good, with a curse like that hanging over her.

“You’re quite welcome,” Petunia said automatically, returning to staring at the wall.

Dumbledore Apparated directly to Remus Lupin’s house, thinking of it as it had been the last time he had seen it. Small, a bit shabby, but not terribly uncomfortable...

He arrived safely, if a bit messily, materializing with a loud crack in the middle of the living room.

“Hello?” he called out. “Remus?”

There was no answer. The house seemed deserted. And something was odd, or out of place, but he couldn’t pinpoint it.

Dumbledore walked slowly through the ground floor, looking around, noting the only partially repaired door to the closet in the front hallway. All the furniture was in place, but everything of a personal nature seemed to be gone. There were no photographs, no knickknacks, no books lying about. No books at all.

That’s what seems so odd. Remus loves to read. There should be books everywhere. There always were.

He walked into the kitchen. A manila envelope lay on the table, addressed in Remus’ handwriting to “Whoever Finds This.”

Feeling a chill, Dumbledore picked it up. This can’t be what it looks like...

He undid the fasteners and pulled out the sheet of Muggle paper within.

Whoever finds this:

Congratulations, you're the new owner of number 17 Oxman Road. The deed is in the safe upstairs in the master bedroom. The combination is 12R-46L-1R. Said safe also contains the keys and title to the car parked in the driveway of this house. The papers are all complete, except for your signature. Sign them and enjoy these things in good health. I no longer need them.

Sincerely,

Remus Lupin

Albus Dumbledore let the paper fall to the table.

“Remus, what have you done?” he said softly.

But he knew the answer already.

He's disappeared. He's taken Harry, and this Gertrude Granger and her sister – Muggle-born witches most likely – and gone into hiding somewhere.

This explains why the wards collapsed – Harry was no longer living in that house, so they were unnecessary. And they were not triggered because the person who entered the house intended Harry no harm.

I must remember that. I must always remember that.

Another thought intruded on his mind.

Last night... wasn't it a full moon?

Yes, he answered himself, but what has that to do with anything?

The teeth marks on the bolt of Black's cell. Don't forget to have them looked at by a werewolf expert. And that fur, too.

But that makes no sense. A werewolf could not possibly do anything so sophisticated, so complex. It is impossible.

This morning, you would have said it was impossible to escape from Azkaban, or to abduct Harry Potter...

He couldn't argue with that.

He picked up the letter and folded it, sliding it into a pocket. I will take care of this myself – the less talk there is about this, the better.

So, now the rest of the magical world must be told this admittedly rather unpleasant news.

I am not looking forward to informing Minerva of this. After she recovers from her heart attack, she will probably beat me senseless, then throw me from the roof of the school. Or at least, I would prefer that she did so, because what she will actually do will be far worse.

She will say, "I told you so." Loudly, repeatedly, and worst of all, truthfully.

(A/N: Minerva lovers, do not despair... our favorite gray tabby will return...

Love to everyone! As you know, no updates till after Tuesday, so just hang in there, and I'll do my best to get one up as soon as we're back in business!)

Chapter 12: Another Angle

Albus Dumbledore stood in the entrance hall of Hogwarts, feeling minorly nervous.

Why do I feel nervous? For that matter, why am I here?

From the Great Hall, he could hear light music and conversations, and as he looked down at himself, he saw that he was wearing his best set of light gray and blue dress robes.

Odd. This would seem to be some kind of social event.

A quiet laugh drew his attention. He turned to see a group of young people – eight of them, as he took a quick head count, four boys and four girls. Most of them appeared to be about the same age, sixteen or seventeen, though one of the girls was younger, fourteen or so. They were all dressed for a formal occasion and talking quietly amongst themselves, obviously waiting for something or someone.

The mix of looks in the group was rather interesting. He counted two redheads, one boy and one girl, and two blonds, though the boy was paler and the girl more brownish. A brown-haired boy held the hand of the youngest girl, who was dark-complexioned, and a girl with brown curls was talking with a black-haired young man.

A door opened behind him, and the young people's heads all turned toward it. Four of them – the dark girl, the girl with brown curls, and the black-haired and blond boys – came forward and knelt on the stone floor. Dumbledore stepped out of their way.

Aletha Freeman, dressed regally in blue, stepped from the room, followed by a veiled woman in white. First Aletha, then the unknown, laid a hand on the head of each kneeling child in turn and said a few quiet words. The black-haired boy was last to receive their attention, and when they had finished, he rose quickly and went to the doors into the Great Hall, waving at someone.

The music within changed into a processional, and the young people organized themselves. The dark girl and the brown-haired boy,

whose face was naggingly familiar – as indeed, Dumbledore realized, all the children's faces were – proceeded through the door first, followed by the blond couple. The red-haired boy offered his arm to the brunette girl and the black-haired boy to the redheaded girl.

Aletha went next, by herself, her back straight and her face serene. Dumbledore realized what his part in this must be, and gave his arm to the bride as the wedding march began to play.

What a strange dream – for a dream it must be – giving away a woman in marriage, a woman I may not even know.

As he approached the dais, though, he discovered that although he might not know the bride, he knew the groom. And the best man.

I obviously have too much on my mind.

He reached the steps and gently lifted the veil from the bride's face.

Gertrude Granger, prettier in person than she had been in her image in the spell, smiled impishly at him, then turned to face Remus Lupin.

Far too much.

The wedding scene blurred in front of him, and he found himself standing next to a table, where a good deal of the current staff of Hogwarts was sitting, laughing and talking together. There was still music, but it was no longer a march. Now it was a waltz, the waltz from Tchaikovsky's Sleeping Beauty, if he wasn't mistaken.

The bride and groom were dancing. Her veil was back so that they could look into each other's eyes, which was almost all they were doing. It was obvious they adored one another.

They do make quite a good-looking couple.

The music seemed to fade, and with it most of the people in the room. The bride and groom came to a halt, eyes still locked. They kissed once, tenderly, then he stepped away from her and vanished. Her wedding gown replaced itself with a Muggle sweatshirt and jeans.

“Welcome, Professor,” said Gertrude Granger as she turned to face him.

Dumbledore inclined his head, a little unsure of what to do next.

“Please, sit down.” Her wave created a chair behind him.

I am not sure how comfortable I am, being in what seems to be her dream. She obviously has great power here, and I do not know her or her proclivities. She might do me serious harm...

“I only want to talk,” Miss Granger said, as if she had read his mind.

Which she may well have done.

“I am amenable to that,” Dumbledore said, seating himself. She sat as well, but without bothering to create the chair beforehand – it simply appeared behind her as she sat down.

I wonder, is this how I appear to others? All-powerful without effort?

“Let me introduce myself. Gertrude Granger, Danger to my friends, of whom I hope you will be one. I hear almost nothing but good about you, and little of the bad is believable.”

Well-spoken, intelligent, neither submissive nor domineering. I may enjoy this after all. “Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

“Pleased to meet you. Tell me, you seemed unsurprised to hear my name. Had you heard of me somewhere before, as I had of you?”

“I had. Mrs. Petunia Dursley identified you for me.”

“Oh, her.” Danger sighed in annoyance. “Let me guess. She cast aspersions upon my character and implied, or outright said, that my younger sister is in fact my daughter.”

“She did.”

“She is wrong. I am a married woman, Professor, and I love my husband dearly. I loved him even before I met him, to the extent that I was willing to wait for him. Which I did. My sister is my sister, nothing else, although I am responsible for her now, since our parents’ deaths last summer.”

“To whom are you married, Ms. Granger?”

“Oh, please, please, call me Danger. If you really prefer last names, I suppose Mrs. Lupin would be most accurate. Or maybe Granger-Lupin – do you know, we haven’t decided about that yet?” She smiled. “But after all, there’s been so much going on.”

“Yes. There has indeed been a great deal going on.” And just how much of it have you been involved in, I wonder?

“You may ask me any questions you like, Professor,” Danger said, leaning back in her chair, apparently perfectly at ease. “I might not answer some of them, or give you only partial answers, but I promise that if I can answer without endangering those I love, I will.”

“Very well. Where is Harry Potter?”

“Safe with people who love him.”

“Including yourself?”

“I won’t answer that.”

“I see. How did Sirius Black escape from Azkaban?”

Danger paused, as if silently conferring with someone. “He had help,” she said finally. “Someone Apparated onto the island and opened his cell from the outside. The two of them returned to the mainland by swimming.”

“Why did the dementors not sense this person?”

“He was not in human form at the time. Dementors sense only human emotions, if I understand correctly.”

“What form was this person in, then, if not human?”

“Wolf form.”

“Is he an Animagus, or a werewolf?”

“A werewolf.”

“Werewolves are not reasoning creatures at the time of the full moon. No werewolf in wolf form could do what you suggest.”

“ This gentleman has recently met someone whose magic counteracts that – a werewolf tamer, if you will. Physical contact with her after his change restores his human mind, while physical contact beginning before the change and lasting through it, until he is in full wolf form, means that he never loses his humanity at all. The change with her present is exactly like an Animagus transformation, down to the detail that he is still clothed when he retransforms.”

“Fascinating. Did the gentleman by any chance recently take this lady to be his wife?”

“He did, but not for her magic only. They are quite in love, I assure you.”

“I believe it. Tell me, how did Black survive the ocean temperature at this season of the year? He should have died from hypothermia long before he ever reached shore.”

“I can't answer that.”

“Can't, or won't?”

“My apologies. Won’t.”

“Very well. Where is Sirius Black, then?”

Danger’s eyes sparked with mischief as she answered. “Asleep next to Harry Potter.”

Dumbledore felt his eyebrows rising. “Really. You claimed a moment ago that Harry was safe and with people who loved him.”

“Which he is. Sirius would rather die than harm Harry.”

“Would he? I wish he had taken that attitude towards Harry’s parents.”

“He did,” Danger said crisply. “He was framed, Headmaster. Sirius Black is innocent. He never betrayed or murdered anyone. Would you like me to explain?”

Dumbledore nodded. His voice seemed unlikely to cooperate with him at the moment. Sirius, innocent? I would be overjoyed if it were true... but how is it possible?

As he listened to Danger’s story, he realized how. And that it was not only possible, but, in the light of the Animagus abilities of Pettigrew and the swap of Secret Keepers, even likely. I would have suspected Peter before Sirius, if I had thought such a choice existed.

But one great obstacle remained to his accepting the story.

“This is, as far as I know, only a dream. I have no proof of these things.”

“If Sirius Black were guilty, would Remus Lupin ever have assisted his escape?” Danger asked politely. “But I can understand your wanting tangible proof. Watch your mail for the next few days, Professor. We will be in touch. Have a pleasant night.” She rose.

“Wait,” Dumbledore said, also rising. “One more question, if I may.”

“Of course.”

“Who were the members of your wedding party?”

“In this dream? I do not know. I have my suspicions about two of them, but about the other six, I know as little as you. Is that all?”

“It is. Thank you very much for a pleasant conversation, Mrs. Lupin.”

Danger smiled warmly. “The pleasure was all mine, Professor.”

They shook hands, and the dream dissolved.

Dumbledore came awake with a small start, got quickly out of bed, and hurried down to his office. He removed his Pensieve from the cupboard and began to add to its contents.

Aletha Freeman was present in the dream. Is she involved in this as well?

Where would they be likely to hide?

And if I find them, what will I do?

The thought stopped him. He sat back for a moment and gave it serious consideration.

What will I do?

If Sirius is innocent, I cannot condemn him to Azkaban, and Harry, it seems, would be better off almost anywhere than with his relatives, no matter the magical protections. Besides, if no one can find him, no one can harm him.

He smiled, slowly, realizing the possibilities of this situation.

I think that, if I do find them, I will take precautions to see that it does not happen again.

Danger slipped into another dream, falling or flying through whirls of color and sound again. Snatches of words in unfamiliar voices caught her ear.

“...co can hel...”

“...go to lu...”

“...vil in...”

“...innee isn...”

“...oy, r...”

“Run, my loves... run and don’t look back...”

Danger jerked. That was me!

But just as she tried to look at the color patch associated with the last sentence, a huge voice began to call something out to her, and she got only a vague impression of grey.

Great. More poetry. Why do I always have to dream in bad iambic tetrameter?

Shut up and listen, said a familiar dry voice. You can complain about the meter later.

Rolling her eyes, Danger did what her husband told her.

Hermione Granger came awake slowly, rubbing her eyes with the hand not otherwise occupied. She registered her first sensations of the morning, which were much the same as usual. Her stomach was empty, ready for breakfast, and her nappy was full, ready to get changed. She would wake up Danger to get that tended to in a moment.

She opened her eyes to look around and saw something new and interesting. A strange man was sleeping a little ways away, with Harry

and Letha snuggled next to him. He had dark hair like Harry. Maybe he was Harry's new daddy, like Moony was her new daddy.

She got up and went over to investigate.

Sirius awakened to the unusual feeling of a slight touch on his upper arm. It was as if someone had poked him there... someone with very small fingers...

He looked up into the earnest face of a bushy-haired little girl, sucking her thumb and gazing at him.

"Hello, there," he said quietly, sitting up carefully so as not to disturb the other sleepers around him. "You must be Neenie. I'm Padfoot. Nice to meet you."

He held out his hand, and the tiny girl solemnly shook it, removing her thumb from her mouth to do so. "I wet," she said, tugging at her nappy.

"Well, I think we can fix that," Sirius said, looking around the room – ah, there it was. He picked up Neenie and headed for the changing table.

I knew I couldn't have forgotten how to do this. Easy enough, once you account for the different equipment. He made sure to get the fastenings in the proper places, threw away the old nappy, and returned to the bed area feeling rather confident.

"T'ank you," Neenie said with a little smile as he put her down.

"You're welcome." She has good manners for eighteen months.

As Neenie cuddled back up against Danger, Aletha roused. "Hmmm?" she said sleepily.

"Everything's fine," Sirius said. Then he heard a tapping sound, strangely familiar... "But I think you may have an owl."

“ ‘ S probably the paper,” Aletha mumbled. “Knuts are on the mantelpiece, will you get it, love?”

“Of course.” Sirius stood up again and found his way into Aletha’s music room, where he collected the correct amount for the paper, then into her kitchen, which had a wide window where, sure enough, the owl was waiting on the ledge, paper in its beak. He put the money in the sack tied to its leg, and it dropped the paper on the table and took off.

Good thing owls can’t talk.

Sirius sat down and opened the paper. Well, well, well, look who’s front page news today...

Daily Prophet, Thursday 15 April 1982

HARRY POTTER DISAPPEARS

Was living with his Muggle relatives in Surrey, one source says

By Rita Skeeter, Special Reporter

Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, was the source of many speculations in the days and weeks following the downfall of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Where was he living? Who was taking care of him? Who could properly raise such a child-hero?

No two people had the same opinion. Some said he was living with a friend of his father’s, others with a friend of his mother, still others with a foster family. There were even some who claimed he had been taken to America or France.

But on one thing, everyone agreed. Harry Potter was being raised magical. After all, who could expect the most famous magical child of our times to be properly raised by Muggles?

Apparently, Albus Dumbledore. In his trademark meddling style, Dumbledore had one of his flunkies retrieve the child from the ruins of

his family home and take the boy to a secret location, now revealed to be a town known as Little Whinging in Surrey, to live with his mother's Muggle relatives.

"Harry Potter will be safest if no one else knows where he is," Dumbledore said at the time. "It is inevitable that some wizards and witches will catch sight of him over the years. I beg of them not to make him aware of anything unusual about him, and not to reveal to anyone where they saw him."

Unfortunately for Dumbledore, all his secrecy seems to have been for nothing. This reporter has learned that Harry Potter, as of this writing, has been missing for more than two days...

Aletha wandered into the kitchen, looking sleep-disheveled and charming. "Anything interesting?" she asked with a yawn.

"They've got word of Harry going missing," Sirius said, turning the paper around so that Aletha could see the headline.

She shrugged. "Was bound to happen sooner or later. You want tea?"

"Yes, please." Sirius checked the clock – twenty to nine. "Don't you have to get ready for work?"

"Didn't I tell you? I have today and tomorrow off." Filling the teakettle, Aletha chuckled. "Madam Bones decided I needed some rest, because I was under so much stress."

"What stress were you under?"

"I was afraid of you, of course, you dolt," Aletha said, lighting the stove with a poke of her wand. "And it was stressful, being afraid all day. I kept wanting to smile and having to remember, scared people don't grin like Cheshire kneazles."

“What kinds of people do grin like Cheshire kneazles, then?” Sirius asked, standing up and crossing the distance between them, pulling Aletha back against him.

She giggled as he kissed her neck. “People in love, you stupid...”

He turned her around and made further name-calling impractical. On the bed, Harry made a small discontented noise. Neenie crawled over and lay down next to him. He rolled over and put his arm over her without waking up.

Danger awakened with a gasp. I hate iambic tetrameter, she said, pressing her hand against her heart, feeling the frantic beat slow. She noticed Sirius and Aletha were gone. Probably off kissing somewhere. Good for them.

Why? Remus was taking slow, deep breaths, calming himself.

Don't know. Probably because it's now what I associate with extremely odd and sudden changes in my lifestyle?

That could be. Let's write it down before it gets away.

Both of them hurried to the desk in the corner of the room and began scribbling.

Little things the world will change,

Your lives and futures rearrange.

There shall be children twice times two

Before the storied year is through.

The youngest comes before the last,

Before the swine her like is cast.

The truth shall bear her unto day,

The star will shine to light her way.

Uneven will she match to brown,
But never'll she leave the town.
There shall be children twice times two
Before the storied year is through.
Eyes of ashes, hair of sun,
A heart with paces never run,
Salvation, justice, vengeance are
When flower gives the stars to star.
What warrior, earth, and pearl begin,
The moon's grey beams will finally win.
Little things the world will change,
Your lives and futures rearrange.
Well.

You said it. Danger studied the scribbled lines in front of her. Do our versions match?

I think so. Let me see. Remus pulled her poem over to himself, checking it against his own. Yes, they do. Any ideas?

Well, it's obviously a warning about more children to come. Danger smiled, a touch sadly. Not ours, I know.

No, not ours. Remus sighed. One of the side effects of lycanthropy was sterility. But Danger knew that when she married you. Stop fussing over what can't be changed.

Not ours... but one for Padfoot and Letha, it seems, Danger chortled in his head. "The truth shall bear her unto day/ The star will shine to light her way." You think Sirius will like having a daughter?

I do. But we're not telling them about this.

Oh, no, of course not. Knowledge of the future can change it – I remember that from my old sci-fi novels.

And I'd rather avoid any little disasters like us preventing the birth of the child who would, in twenty years, have saved the world.

Too late to prevent that now. Danger looked affectionately over her shoulder. Remus followed suit to see Harry and Neenie, again snuggled in the middle of the mattresses like puppies. But who this other stanza's talking about, I haven't got a clue, she continued. Sound like anyone you know?

Not off the top of my head. Let's put it away and think more about it later.

"Breakfast!" Aletha called from the other side of the house.

That sounds like a better idea all the time. Grab a kid – last one to the kitchen's a rotten dragon egg!

Evening Prophet, Wednesday 14 April 1982, Special Edition

SIRIUS BLACK ESCAPES FROM AZKABAN

Ministry urges caution: "No need for panic," says Minister Fudge

By Rita Skeeter, Special Reporter

Sirius Black, notorious mass murderer, was earlier today discovered to be missing from Azkaban prison, sending waves of fear through the magical world. Ministry personnel are still investigating the disappearance. Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and the man responsible for Black's incarceration, declined comment.

Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge made a brief statement. "We already have a fix on Black through basic scrying," Fudge said. "With the help of Muggle law enforcement, we hope to have him reapprehended soon. There is no need for panic; please do not overreact."

However, another source within the Ministry, speaking on condition of anonymity, claimed that the so-called "fix" on Black proved to be false and useless, and would have been no good even if true. "I mean, what do you expect?" the source said. "Muggle law enforcement, really – what are they going to do, say 'Stop' to him? And if he doesn't stop, say 'Stop' again?"

Every wizard and witch on the street blanches at the thought of the fearsome Black suddenly appearing at their kitchen window, like a ravening wolf, ready to repeat his horrific crimes...

Danger looked across the table at the notorious mass murderer, currently getting a banana shampoo from his godson. She leaned over to Aletha, who was gazing adoringly at Sirius and Harry. "He's so fearsome, how do you stand it?" she asked lightly.

"Oh, I blanch every time I see his face," Aletha returned. "And the banana highlights in his hair make him look utterly ravening, don't you think?"

"Just horrific," Danger said, shaking her head.

"Now, now, ladies, there's only so much complimenting one man can withstand in a day," Sirius said, wiping his hair with a napkin. "Besides, I'm a one-woman man, and I'm taken."

"Yes, by me," Aletha pointed out. "So I'm allowed."

"To do what?"

"Harass you to within an inch of your life," Aletha said triumphantly.

Sirius sighed. "I'm going to regret this," he said to no one in particular.

"Regret what?" Aletha pounced gleefully on the word. "Marrying me?"

"How could I ever regret marrying you?" Sirius asked, standing up. "Especially since it hasn't even happened yet." He came around the table, leaned over Aletha, and kissed her.

Neenie and Harry blew raspberries.

Danger laughed. "I guess they're not fans of kissing."

"Get used to it," Sirius growled teasingly at the children. "You're going to be seeing a lot of it."

"Not today they're not," Remus said, emerging from behind the morning paper. "Danger and I are taking them to the park all day. It's a gorgeous day, and they've been in the car a lot lately. They need to get out and stretch their legs."

And it's just coincidence that we're leaving these two here alone?

Oh, of course it is. Sirius has a lot of readjusting to do, Danger my love, as well as he hides it. I think he's still riding the high of the escape, and he's going to crash very soon.

And he doesn't need a strange woman and a pair of nosy children horning in when he does. Don't worry, I understand.

I wasn't worried. Remus winked at her. Besides, who's to say that we can't snag a little kissing time while the little ones are busy in the sandbox?

Danger rolled her eyes. Men! One-track minds!

Women! Everything hopelessly complicated!

Did we just delineate the battle of the sexes in eight words?

Yes, I believe we did.

Mentally, they both cracked up.

We've had nearly six months to mourn for Lily and James, Aletha thought, holding Sirius in her arms as he cried. He's been trying to stay sane, and the best way for him to do that would be to try to stay off that subject. Besides, part of grieving is moving on, and he could never do that in Azkaban. So now he has to catch up on it.

"You are not allowed to blame yourself," she said quietly to him. "How could you, or anyone, have known Peter was the traitor?"

"I should have known," Sirius said between sobs. "I should have realized. He gave me the idea of switching us, Letha. He suggested it. How could I not have seen?"

"Should have, would have, could have, all add up to one thing, Sirius," Aletha said gently. "Didn't. We didn't see. None of us saw. And we all took the punishment for it. You just got the worst end of the deal. Which you did not deserve, and you are not even allowed to think that you deserved it."

"Tyrannical woman," Sirius muttered into his tissue. "Even regulates what I'm allowed to think."

"And don't you forget it." Aletha hugged her beloved fiancé. "We can't change the past, my love. The only thing we can change is the future. And we are changing it. Harry Potter gets to grow up with parents, parents and a sister. That has to be worth something."

"Parents, he's got," Sirius said, blowing his nose. "Four of them. Have we decided yet what they're supposed to call us?"

"Padfoot, Letha, Moony, and Danger have been working so far. After all, we're not really their mums or dads."

Sirius nodded. "I would feel kind of strange if Harry called me Dad. I mean, James was his father. It would feel... I don't know,

disrespectful, I guess. Besides, I've always been Padfoot to him, and it doesn't make sense to have him call me one thing and Neenie call me another. What is her real name, by the way? Please tell me her parents didn't actually name her Neenie..."

"No, it's Hermione. And from what Danger tells me, she used to be just about the shyest little thing you could shake a wand at. But she warmed right up to Remus first, then to me, and now to you – didn't I see you carrying her when I woke up?"

"She came over and woke me up to tell me she was wet," Sirius said with a slightly wobbly laugh. "I fixed the problem, and she thanked me very politely."

"Yes, she has very nice manners. Except when she wants something. Then she sounds like she's part banshee."

Sirius smiled, shaking his head and wiping a last tear from his cheek. "I have a feeling life will never be dull around here."

(A/N: Understatement of the year, anyone?)

About the music: If you don't know Tchaikovsky, do you know Disney? They used the tune of the waltz I have Remus and Danger dancing to in their animated *Sleeping Beauty*, as the tune of the song "Once Upon a Dream". Just in case you need a reference point! Oh yes, and special mention to the first person to catch my little X-Men allusion!

Hugs to all, and warning that this update may be my last for a week or so... depends on how much work I get done over break! See you all next time, whenever that may be!)

Chapter 13: What It Would Now Be

“How are we going to get in touch with him?” Aletha asked over dinner. “I mean, you’re free to use my owl, but he’s eventually going to figure out who she belongs to...”

“No, no need to use Maya. We can send him what he wants by 3M,” Remus said.

“3M?”

“Stands for Muggle-to-Magical Mail, Sirius. You never had Muggle relatives, so you wouldn’t know about it. It’s how Muggles can send mail to their children at Hogwarts, or to a wizarding friend, if they don’t have an owl of their own.”

“How’s it work?” Danger asked.

“You double-envelope whatever it is you’re mailing. Inner envelope you address as usual, outer envelope you address to Box 313 at one of the London post offices – they have several so the mail doesn’t pile up. Someone from the Diagon Alley office comes around every day to get the mail from the Muggle boxes and send it out via owl post.”

“That’s pretty smart,” Sirius said. “I always did wonder how the Muggle-born kids got their parents’ letters.”

“Well, lots of them had their own owls they could send home,” Aletha pointed out. “But the ones who didn’t, had this. And now we can use it to give Professor Dumbledore what he wants.”

“Edited carefully for content, of course,” Danger said. “You and Harry for sure, Sirius, and possibly me and Neenie, but nothing with Remus or Letha in it. Not yet.”

Remus nodded. “Safety first, after all.”

On Friday, the Daily Prophet carried the news of Barty Crouch’s relocation to the Department of International Magical Cooperation.

Lars Vilias had been promoted to Head of Magical Law Enforcement, and Amelia Bones had moved up to Assistant Head.

An hour or so later, a pair of owls arrived for Aletha.

“What’s up?” Sirius asked, looking up from the picture Harry was drawing for him.

“Well, you remember my boss was promoted?”

“Yes?”

“I wasn’t promoted with her. I’ve been relocated to the Bureau of Magical Education.”

“I didn’t even know there was a Bureau of Magical Education,” Remus said, entering the room in time to hear this.

“Neither did I.” Aletha looked down at the paper. “Ah, it’s newly formed. Says here they want me to be the ‘Hogwarts/Ministry Liaison’, whatever that means.”

“The interfering busybody who tells Dumbledore how to run his school,” Sirius translated.

Aletha shrugged. “That’s fine with me. They’ll give me the messages, but who says they’ll get delivered? I’ll have a nice cup of tea with the Headmaster, I’ll tell him what’s going on at the Ministry, I’ll give him all the pretty official parchments, and everyone will be happy. Better than doing paperwork until my eyes cross, that’s for sure.”

Remus took a seat at the table. “Who’s the other one from?”

“Dumbledore,” Aletha said, perusing the letter again. “Says he’ll be happy to have me around again, and he’ll be stopping by on Monday, to give me something...” She stopped, frowning, and reread a portion of the letter. “ ‘Something that should by rights have been yours,’ ” she quoted.

“Huh. Wonder what that is,” Sirius said curiously. Harry tugged at his arm, and he turned back to the paper. “Harry, that’s a wonderful... whatever it is. What is it?”

“You!” Harry said brightly. “Pa-foot! Doggie!”

“Of course it is. What a nice picture of me, Harry. I really like it.”

Remus leaned over to have a look. “Oh, that’s you all right, Padfoot,” he agreed with a straight face. “Lots of hair and eight legs. You sure you don’t want an acromantula instead, Letha? I think there’s some in the Forest at Hogwarts, you can get yourself one and feed this great ugly bloke to it...”

Sirius threw a crayon at Remus.

Saturday was the day Harry and Neenie got into the pantry and discovered the joys of throwing flour at one another. Sunday was uneventful except for Sirius almost exploding the toilet while trying to clean up a mess in the bathroom. And on Monday, Aletha went back to work.

Someone was able to direct her to her new office, which was small but comfortable. Even has a window. No secretary, but I didn’t expect one... not for someone who was a secretary herself on Wednesday!

What she did have was a number of owls. We have got to find a better way of sending interoffice memos, she thought as she took the letters from the birds. My desk is already a mess and I haven’t even been here five minutes.

Most of them were simple letters of welcome and congratulations on her new job. One, though, was a little odd. She had to read it twice before she realized exactly what the writer was getting at, and once she did figure it out, she hissed in anger and dropped it on her desk as if it were a poisonous snake.

How dare he. How dare that... that... pure-blood patronize me! Offer me his “protection” in return for favors! How dare he!

Quickly, she made a copy of the letter to take home with her. Everyone'll get a laugh out of this. The day a Death Eater offers help to a Muggle-born!

Someone knocked on her door. "Come in," she called.

Albus Dumbledore entered her office.

My office. That does sound nice.

"Professor, welcome," she said, standing up with a genuine smile to receive him.

"Thank you, Ms. Freeman. I am glad to see you in good spirits, after the troubling news of Wednesday."

Troubling news... oh, right. Don't be stupider than you have to be, Aletha. Get your public face on. "A few days off worked wonders, sir. Not to mention a new position, a new office, and a very nice salary increase. Oh, I'm sorry, please sit down, sir." As they sat down, she thought out how to ask her biggest question. "I have been wondering, sir. Why does the Ministry suddenly feel it necessary to have an official presence at Hogwarts, even if it's only a Liaison?"

"Perceptive as always, Aletha... if I may call you such?" She inclined her head, and Dumbledore continued. "Recent events have reminded Cornelius that his grasp over a great deal of magical life in Britain is tenuous at best. Since he cannot strengthen it where it truly needs strengthening, he has decided to tighten up where it does not. In my opinion, not the wisest of moves, which is why I asked for you to be placed in this position."

"You asked for me, sir? Thank you, but why?"

"Because I know you to be intelligent, perceptive, and independent. I could use your opinions about some aspects of running Hogwarts," he laid delicate stress on the second-person pronoun, "and you will not hesitate to give them to me if I ask for them, and perhaps even if I do not."

Aletha laughed. "Only if I think you really need the advice, sir, and somehow I doubt that will happen any time soon."

"When the time comes, Aletha, please do speak out. Ah, and that reminds me of the other reason for my visit. Something I have recently realized must belong to you."

"Sir?"

"May I bring up what might be a painful subject, Aletha?"

"Certainly."

"Then, Sirius Black. You seem to be handling the news of his escape quite well."

Oh, very well. It was only the best news of my life. "Thank you, sir."

"If I may ask, what were your feelings towards him?"

Utter devotion. "I cared about him, sir. We were friends. We could have been more, I think, if he had been the man I thought he was."

Dumbledore nodded gravely. "He betrayed us all – but, perhaps, you a bit less than most."

He betrayed no one, but he was betrayed. And I wish I could tell you that, but with no proof but a dream, even you wouldn't believe me... Aletha settled for looking politely quizzical.

"I was there when his apartment was searched, and we found one item that baffled us, until, on Friday, I remembered that you and Sirius had been romantically attached. I did some research and found it was almost certainly meant for you."

An item, meant for me, something with romantic meaning... oh my God, I think I know...

Albus Dumbledore pulled a small velvet box from his pocket.

Aletha told her tears to go away and stay away, and smiled flirtatiously. "Professor, I'm flattered, but aren't I a little young for you?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "It is yours, to do with as you wish," he said, putting the box on her desk. "I suggest you look at it before you decide, though."

Aletha flipped the box open and pressed her hand to her lips, stunned. "Oh my."

Sirius had either chosen exceptionally carefully, or he had had the ring custom-made. It was made of gold, with a star sapphire set in its top, framed by tiny pearls.

It's so beautiful...

Suddenly realizing what her face must look like, she snapped the box shut again.

Dumbledore was watching her carefully, his face unreadable. "Is there anything you wish to tell me, Aletha?" he asked quietly.

No. Not yet. I can't take the risk yet. I can't risk losing it all, just when I've finally found it. I will, someday, but not today.

She shook her head. "No, sir. Nothing at all."

"Very well." Dumbledore rose. "I believe I have overstayed my time, I will be needed at the school..."

Aletha nodded. "Have a good day, Headmaster."

"You as well, Ms. Freeman."

Dumbledore had reviewed his conversation with Petunia Dursley several times through the medium of his Pensieve. On his first listening, all he got from the conversation was the fact that Petunia

was alarmingly self-centered and able to rationalize her bad decisions, and on his second listening, he had realized that Gertrude Granger's parents had almost certainly been killed by Death Eaters.

But on his third, he had caught a fragment of a sentence Petunia had spoken, mentioning a black woman who had come with Gertrude and Remus, and whom Harry had known. He had immediately thought of Aletha Freeman, of her steady friendship with the Potters, and of her tumultuous, on-again, off-again romance with Sirius Black. Adding that to his dream of the wedding, he had seen if the ring found in Black's apartment was Aletha's size. It was.

While we talked about him, her words and the tenor of her thoughts were almost entirely opposite. And when she saw the ring, her face was joyous...

For one of the only times in his life, Albus Dumbledore was unsure what to believe.

It was an uncomfortable feeling.

An owl soared through his open window and landed on his desk, dropping a letter in front of him. It was addressed to him in an unfamiliar feminine handwriting, which he would have described as neat if it hadn't occasionally been sprawling. Across the corner was written "Photographs: DO NOT BEND."

I wonder if this is what I have been waiting for...

He unsealed the envelope. A small piece of paper fell out, and he set it aside for later. He was more interested in the five enclosed photographs – one look at them assured him that they were, most certainly, what he had been waiting for.

He double-checked that his door was locked and instructed the portraits that he did not wish to be disturbed. The last thing I need is for Minerva to see one of these. Or worse, Severus.

The first photograph was of Sirius and Harry at a dinner table. They appeared to be feeding one another carrot sticks, exchanging bite for

bite. Sirius occasionally turned away from Harry to say something to, Dumbledore assumed, someone else at the table. I wonder who else was there?

Next was a picture of Sirius sitting next to Gertrude Granger – no, she likes to be called Danger – at a table with an electric typewriter on it. She had her fingers curved as if to type, and was explaining something to Sirius, who had his hands on the keys and was listening to her intently. On the floor beside them, Harry built a block tower with a little girl his own age, whose hair resembled Danger's. Her sister. I don't think she, or Petunia, ever told me the girl's name...

On a whim, he turned the picture over. There, on the back in black ballpoint, was written "Padfoot, Danger, Harry, and Hermione, Spring 1982." It was the same handwriting which had addressed the letter.

How helpful of Danger. It must be her writing, I would recognize Aletha's...

He shook his head. That's an assumption, Albus. You have no proof Aletha is involved.

He put the photograph at the back of the group to look at the next one. This showed Harry and Sirius standing in a pantry, laughing and throwing handfuls of flour at Danger and Hermione, who were retaliating in kind. The overall impression was that a blizzard had hit the kitchen.

The fourth picture showed Harry and Sirius playing some kind of crawling chase game under a table...

No, a piano. Tables have no pedals.

And someone is playing the instrument, or at least sitting on the bench.

Harry crawled over and sat down on one of the feet on the pedals, wrapping his arms around the dark-skinned leg it was attached to. White, diagonal lines marred the smooth, dark skin.

Certainly a black woman, then, and one with scars on her leg from something...

A memory flitted just out of reach. Dumbledore retrieved his Pensieve, added the thought of the photograph to it, and poked it with his wand.

The miniature likeness of a woman rose out of the basin. "I know Madame Pomfrey could have healed it right up, Professor," her silvery image said in the echoing voice of memory. "But I wanted a reminder of why it's not a good idea to keep playing with a broken bat. Besides, all good Quidditch players have scars, and it's down there on my leg, so it's not as if people are going to be seeing it every day. Right?"

Aletha Freeman sank back into the swirling mass of thoughts.

Well, that answers that question.

Dumbledore remembered vividly the Quidditch match where Aletha's bat had broken after three hours of hard play. She had been careless with the splintered edge and scratched her leg severely, but she had hidden it until the end of the match. There were disadvantages to the red Gryffindor Quidditch robes, Dumbledore reflected ruefully, one of them being that it was harder to see if the players were bleeding – and Gryffindors were exactly the types to play injured, denying that a little hurt could slow them down.

So wherever Sirius and Harry are, Aletha is either with them or coming to see them.

Somehow, I expected nothing else.

He turned over the last photograph. It was an overhead angle of Sirius, asleep in his usual disorder of pillows and blankets, with Harry nestled by his side, secure in the protective curve of his godfather's arm. As he watched, Sirius shifted slightly, and Harry snuggled closer to him.

Harry looks well and happy. Thank God.

And no child sleeps like that beside someone who frightens him.

Of course, this could all be a ruse, an elaborate deception to put me off guard...

But Aletha and Remus are part of this, and of their loyalty I have no doubts. I would never have doubted Sirius, were it not for the evidence against him.

Still, to make entirely certain...

He tapped the side of the photograph with his wand and spoke three words.

The picture went black for a moment, then filled with static, much as a Muggle TV did when set to a channel which was not transmitting. Frowning, Dumbledore repeated the spell, consciously focusing on putting more power into it.

The static cleared; the picture revealed was illuminating.

Sirius was sitting at a kitchen table, chatting animatedly with Danger, who was kneading bread dough on the other side of the table. Harry and the little girl, Hermione, were playing under the table, zooming model broomsticks around and crashing them into each other, laughing.

The photographs might have been posed and prepared, but this, they would have no way of knowing about. They probably have anti-spying spells on the house – my first attempt did not fail, it was blocked – so they consider themselves safe.

What people do in their own homes, when they feel they are safe from prying eyes, is the best test of their character.

And these people... are simply living their lives.

He watched, oddly loath to let the sight go, as Danger finished kneading her bread and shaped it into loaves, as Harry bumped his head on the table and began to cry, as Sirius picked him up and

comforted him, as Hermione trotted out of the room only to return with a book and demand imperiously (if silently, to him) that Sirius read to her and Harry immediately...

There was a letter with these. I should read it.

Unwillingly, he returned the photograph to its original state and picked up the folded piece of paper (not parchment).

Dear Professor,

As promised, some tangible evidence about what we discussed. We would be grateful if you were careful where you kept these. Expect another package around the time of a certain second birthday, and again at Christmas.

With best wishes for a good Easter,

GGL

Folding the paper again, Dumbledore smiled.

A wise woman, to put nothing more on paper than she must. So I too will be wise.

Harry is in no danger – he chuckled at the unintended pun – of being spoiled with a child like Hermione in the house. She seems both strong-willed and strong-minded. The right kind of girl to be his friend, his sister. And perhaps more, later.

Or perhaps not. That is still a long way off. First he needs to survive his childhood.

And my contribution to his survival will be to say nothing, but watch and listen, and misdirect as needed...

In other words, business as usual.

Business as usual also applied to a ramshackle house in Devon, where everything was in shambles, the children were shrieking at the

top of their lungs (and seven sets of lungs created a lot of shrieking), and that man was working late again.

But, Molly Weasley had to admit to herself, she loved him anyway.

She scooped up Ginevra and began to bounce her gently, checking her diaper (dry) and cooing to her. The twins were probably tormenting poor Ronald again, that boy never seemed to be able to get out of the way in time...

In a huge, luxurious country house, a man's face creased with anger. He crumpled a sheet of parchment in his hand.

"She dares," he growled. "She dares turn me down. I am miles above her, she should be kissing my feet and thanking me for deigning to notice her, and she has the audacity to turn me down..."

The house-elf, entering with a bottle of wine and a glass, noticed the look on his master's face and winced. This was going to be a painful night, he could tell already...

Later, the house-elf tried, without success, to soothe the weeping child in the crib. "Sshh, sshh, little master," he whispered. "Sssh, do not cry. If your father is hearing, he is being angry, and that is bad, that is very bad..."

The door crashed open. "Out," the master snapped at the house-elf. "This brat needs some discipline."

The house-elf scurried away, thankful that he had avoided punishment himself but wretched that his little master was getting it instead...

My poor little master, the house-elf thought as he curled up in his secret nest. He is always getting hit, and only for crying at his nightmares. And why is he having nightmares? Because Master is always hitting him...

"Bad Dobby, to think such terrible things about Master," he muttered, and punched himself hard in the eye.

A woman sang a lullaby to her infant daughter.

Moonlight, moonlight, show my baby dear,

How to see what people say is never really here...

Sitting on the front stoop of her house, a huge black dog stretched out at her feet, Aletha admired the sapphire on her finger as the waning moon struck glints from it. "Tomorrow, lunchtime," she said with a smile. "No sense putting it off any longer."

The dog nodded solemnly.

A little boy walked carefully besides his grandmother, lugging an immense and heavy metal watering can, very proud to be helping with such an important job as watering the plants before he went to bed.

The world turned slowly on its axis, and just as slowly, reshaped itself from what it would have been into what it would now be.

(A/N: OK, so I like being cryptic. That's not a crime, is it?

Homework is still here, so updates may be infrequent until Christmas break starts... which for me is December 15th... just to let you know. Hugs to everyone!)

Chapter 14: The Second Letter

Dear Professor,

As I'm sure you can see from the enclosures, the second birthday party was a hit. Hermione was a little miffed that the birthday boy got to open all the presents, but we managed.

Danger chuckled. Oh, yes, we managed.

Neenie had thrown a screaming fit when they wouldn't let her rip the interesting paper off even one box.

One well-placed swat fixed that right up, though.

She rubbed the feathery end of the pen thoughtfully, thinking of how to phrase her next sentence.

The gift you gave my good friend was much appreciated and has been put to good use.

She nodded, satisfied. That should tell him what he wants to know. Sirius and Aletha had got married, much as she and Remus had, in a civil Muggle ceremony. Aletha had rather enjoyed the fact that no one at work had noticed her ring for nearly a week.

Nightmares continue for the two afflicted members of the household, but are becoming less frequent.

Danger shivered a little. That doesn't say nearly enough, but it will have to do.

Harry's first nightmare had been exactly a week from the night he'd been rescued. His panicked screams had woken everyone – except himself...

“NO! NO! NO CUBBUD!”

Danger snapped awake at the first scream. Harry!

“NOOO!” The little boy’s back was arched, his hands fisted and his eyes still squeezed shut. Sirius snatched Harry up and called his name as Neenie wailed in fright.

Danger, disentangling her legs from the sheet in order to get to her sister, watched as Harry fought his way awake, gasped in relief at seeing who was holding him, and threw his arms around Sirius’ neck. “Pa-foot,” he sobbed, clinging to Sirius. “No cubbud, Pa-foot. No cubbud. I good.”

“No cupboard, Harry,” Sirius said gently. “You’re a good boy. You’re safe now. Ssshhh, it’s all right now.”

Remus picked up Neenie to soothe her as Danger finally freed herself from the sheet.

“Here, you go to Letha for a minute,” Sirius said, carefully prying Harry’s fingers loose. Aletha held Harry close and hummed something to him as Sirius got up and went into the kitchen. A moment later, there was an almost inaudible crash, followed by several muttered words, most of which Danger suspected were not at all polite.

Sirius returned looking decidedly better. “It was a mug,” he said, forestalling Aletha’s question as he sat back down on the mattresses. “And I fixed it.”

“Feel better?” Remus asked over the already half-asleep Neenie.

“Yes, actually.”

“And do remember,” Danger put in, “that Vernon Dursley is in jail for something he didn’t do, and Petunia and Dudley are trying to get by on whatever paltry salary she’s earning, since as far as I know she has no skills besides rumor-mongering.”

That made everyone laugh, and the tension in the room slowly ebbed out.

Sirius' nightmares were both easier and harder to deal with. Easier, because he could understand them and tell what they had been about – harder, because they dealt with more frightening subjects...

"No! Please, James, no! I didn't, you have to believe me! Please, don't..."

"Sirius!" Aletha shook him hard. "Sirius, wake up!"

Gasping, Sirius shot upright. "Where's Harry?"

"Right here," Danger said, showing him the boy, wide-eyed in her arms. "Do you want him?"

"Not now." Sirius ran his hands through his hair. "That was... horrible."

"What was?" Remus asked in that certain tone of his, the one that was so quiet and unassuming on the face of it, but somehow made one really, really want to obey.

Does it? I never knew it worked so well.

Yes, you did.

"Remus, I... I don't want to talk about it."

"You have to," Remus said, a touch more forcefully than before. "It's the only way you'll ever get over it. You can't deal with this all by yourself – none of us can. It's why we came together in the first place. We're here to help you, Sirius. But you have to tell us what's going on."

Sirius shivered. Hermione scooted herself closer to him and pulled on his sleeve. When he looked down, she held up her arms, and he lifted her into his lap, where she cuddled close to him. "All right. But it's pretty nasty."

"We're ready," Remus said simply. Danger nodded in affirmation, and Aletha squeezed Sirius' hand.

“It was James and Lily. They were here, in this house, but they were... they were dead. They looked as if they’d been dead for months. Their faces, their bodies, they were... rotting.”

Danger stroked Harry’s hair, hoping he couldn’t understand any of this.

“They said they were here for Harry, here to take him away with them. I told them, if that meant they were going to kill him, I wouldn’t let them. Lily got mad – you remember how she always used to do, when her eyes and her voice would get so cold you thought you’d just been frozen?”

Remus and Aletha nodded. A memory of Remus’ drifted into Danger’s mind – a delicate red-haired woman, with eyes astoundingly like Harry’s, freezing her husband with one look. I have to find out if they have photographs. I’ve never seen Harry’s parents except through other people’s memories and my dreams...

“She said I had no right to Harry, that they were his parents and they knew what was best for him.” Sirius looked haunted. “And then James told me they knew the truth.”

“What truth?” Remus asked. “What did he say?”

“He said... he said that I did it on purpose. That I made Peter the Secret-Keeper on purpose. Because I knew he was the traitor and they’d be killed. He said...” Sirius was shaking now. “He said I killed them so I could have Harry.”

The room was silent for a moment.

“No,” Aletha said firmly. “That is not true and you know it, Sirius Black. If it were, why would you not have taken Harry from Hagrid that night? You were there, with your motorcycle. Why not just take Harry and fly away, if he was all you wanted?”

“Sirius, you would never have betrayed James and Lily,” Remus said fervently. “In all the time I’ve known you, you’ve never broken a promise, not even when it meant trouble for you – why would you break the most important promise of your life?”

I guess it’s my turn... “We all wish Harry could have his parents back,” Danger said, hoping she was doing right. Remus gave her a mental thumbs-up, and she continued. “But he can’t. So we have to give him the best we can. We’ll make sure he knows their names and faces and what they did, for the world and for him. And we’ll make sure he grows up happy and strong and brave. That’s the best we can do.”

“You’re right,” Sirius said, looking up, his grey eyes less shadowed now than they had been a few moments before. “All of you. You’re right.” He stopped, as if trying to think of what to say next.

“Thank you, everyone,” he said finally, but within the simple words Danger could hear all the things he couldn’t say.

Thank you for giving me hope again. Thank you for helping me climb out of this pit life’s dropped me into. Please don’t give up, I will make it. But I’m going to need time and help.

Variations on “You’re welcome” came from each of the others.

We’re here for you, was the silent message. We’re willing to wait for you and give you the help you need. We won’t give up on you. We promise.

Aletha began to sing. “All Through the Night”, the old lullaby, promising that love watched over the beloved one in their sleep...

It was exactly what was needed, for everyone.

One by one, the members of the Pack drifted back to sleep. Ah yes, I should probably put something in about that.

She began a new paragraph.

Incidentally, we've come up with a new moniker for ourselves. We are now known as the Pack. Catchy, isn't it?

Danger smiled again, recalling the night the name had been coined.

Our first full moon together... appropriate somehow.

"If you're tame, there's no reason for you not to come to the den tonight," Sirius said, leaning his chair back against the kitchen wall.

Remus looked – and felt, Danger knew – uncomfortable. "I don't know, Padfoot. I'm just..."

"Shy?" Sirius suggested. "No need to be. You're kind of cute when you're a wolf."

Thanks a lot, Remus said sarcastically to Danger.

He's right.

Oh, not you too.

Yes, me too. And I'll tell you why.

"I think it's a good idea," Danger said aloud. "For the children. There's going to be so much we can't tell them, and so much we're going to have to ask of them. Harry's perfectly comfortable around an Animagus – " She waved at Sirius, who gave a little bow from his chair. " – though I will admit you startled Neenie quite a bit the first time she saw you transform."

Everyone laughed, remembering. Hermione had screamed and run behind the couch when the enormous black dog had appeared. Harry, on the other hand, had screamed with joy and run toward the dog. Neenie had eventually come out, but she was still just a little wary around Sirius in his dog form.

"There's no reason they can't accept a werewolf on the same terms. And it's one less secret we have to keep from them."

Et tu, Pericule?

I think that's the most convoluted classical allusion I've ever heard. How did you even know the vocative of the Latin word for danger?

Never mind. I give up.

"Fine. You win. I'll come down tonight after moonrise." Remus sighed. "I hope we don't regret this."

That night, in their bedroom, Remus and Danger made their preparations. Danger sat cross-legged on the floor, and Remus knelt beside her, hands planted on the floor. Danger placed her hands over his. After a quick kiss, they opened their minds to one another, each surrendering to the other, flowing together and joining as one.

Danger could feel the nearness of moonrise with the urgency of the werewolf, but she could also feel her own presence, a mitigating force, keeping the beast leashed and tamed. Remus' own image for it had been of himself standing on a tiny island, helplessly watching the wave build that would sweep him away inescapably into the merciless ocean, where he would be tossed around for the length of the night before being thrown ashore, battered and exhausted, in the morning.

The wave might be inescapable, but with Danger at his side, Remus had a safety line to the shore. He wouldn't half-drown or be bashed against the rocks the ocean's surface concealed. The physical transformation still caused him some pain, but he could deal with it.

As long as I stay human, love, I can deal with just about anything.

She felt his mind's presence within her own, foreign and yet not, a known quantity, safe and reliable. He smelled of cinnamon, she noticed, cinnamon and nutmeg and cloves...

The moon slid above the horizon, and they both stiffened. Danger pressed her hands down against Remus' and watched without flinching as her love changed. They bore together the flashes of pain as his body twisted, and talked silently of everyday things until the transformation was over.

Then they went downstairs together, to the den where Sirius and Aletha waited with Harry and Neenie.

The children were slightly hesitant at first, but after Sirius demonstrated again how a person could be an animal too, they accepted the big gray doggie as Moony, and snuggled up against him to listen to Danger read them a bedtime story. By the time the story was over, they were both asleep, holding hands.

"They're not going to be sure if they're children or cubs by the time they grow up," Sirius said, brushing Harry's hair away from his face.

"Is that so bad?" Aletha asked, sitting with her knees drawn up to her chest. "Wolves have good survival instincts, and Harry's going to need that. Hermione too, if only because she's associated with him."

"We really are organized more like a wolf pack than a traditional human family," Danger mused aloud. "Four adults, two children... and we really have the children in common, you know. I've been watching – they come to all of us about equally if they want something. Neenie's on your lap every time I turn around, Sirius. You don't have to pick her up every time she asks you."

Sirius shrugged. "Who am I to refuse a lady?"

"This little hoodlum's no lady. Maybe in twenty years."

Now, now, no disparaging the cubs.

Danger made a face at her husband. "I'll disparage my own sister as much as I want to, thank you very much."

"Oh, no, you won't," Sirius said, striking a brave pose. "I will fight for my lady's honor."

"Since when is she your lady and not me?" Aletha demanded.

"Well, can't a man have more than one lady?"

“Not unless one of them is his sister or his daughter,” Aletha said firmly.

Sirius shrugged. “She’s close enough, I think. To being my daughter, I mean. That is, if you’ll share,” he said to Remus and Danger.

“You want her, you can have her. She’s no prize, I’ll tell you that.”

Trade you. Half-share in Harry for half a share in Hermione.

Danger repeated the offer aloud, and Sirius nodded. “Done,” he said.

“No, not done,” Aletha said, shoving Sirius. “Not until I have my say.” She faced Danger. “Done,” she said, extending her hand. Danger seized it, and they shook enthusiastically.

The men exchanged bewildered glances. Sirius shrugged, as did Remus, carefully to avoid jostling the children. The statement of “Women...” was as clear as if they had said it aloud.

So, if we’re going to share the children pack-style, why not just go all the way and call ourselves a pack? Remus suggested. Danger relayed the idea.

“I like it,” Aletha said. “Makes referring to everyone easier.”

“You know my take on it. Dogs are pack animals too.” Sirius transformed into Padfoot and rolled over beside Aletha, waving his paws entreatingly.

“Oh, fine,” she said in tones of pretend annoyance, and rubbed his belly, making him whine with pleasure.

Behind the ears, please?

Oh, fine.

Remus wolf-grinned at his wife, and Danger couldn't help smiling back as she scratched his head vigorously.

"Neither of you is allowed to give these children fleas, though," Aletha said, chuckling as she found the spot on Sirius' stomach that made his leg kick uncontrollably.

That's the wrong tone for a beta female to use with the alpha male, missy!

Danger burst out laughing.

But he's entirely right. Remus, for all his gentleness, is our alpha male. Sirius lacks... I guess initiative is the word. He has plenty of good ideas, and the determination to see them through, but he just doesn't start things easily.

And of course, there's the fact that Sirius obeys Remus, and not the other way around. Sirius is a good man, intelligent and brave and strong, but he is a follower instead of a leader. Whereas Remus is the best kind of leader – reluctant.

So. Remus as alpha male, which would place me as alpha female, I suppose. Sirius and Aletha as the betas, and Harry and Neenie as our cubs.

She nodded thoughtfully. We make a good Pack. We balance each other's weaknesses with strengths. And we all love the children.

But all this thinking is not getting my letter written.

She bent over the parchment again, rereading what she already had.

Dear Professor,

As I'm sure you can see from the enclosures, the second birthday party was a hit. Hermione was a little miffed that the birthday boy got to open all the presents, but we managed.

The gift you gave our mutual friend was much appreciated and has been put to good use. Nightmares continue for the two afflicted members of the household, but are becoming less frequent.

Incidentally, we've come up with a new moniker for ourselves. We are now known as the Pack. Catchy, isn't it?

Danger bit her lip, thinking.

Now something about Harry, I think.

She remembered just in time to dip the quill in the ink before she wrote.

The birthday boy is now physically quite healthy. He seems to like his new home very much indeed. We certainly like having him.

Danger chuckled. Hope that's not too gloaty. "Ha, ha, we have Harry and you don't..."

She dipped her quill again.

The rest of the Pack is also well. Our alpha male wants to express his thanks for your discreet handling of his affairs.

That sentence should tell Dumbledore who was in general charge of the household. The Headmaster had transferred Remus' house into his own name, then found a Muggle family in the area in need of a home and sold it to them at a price they could afford. Danger only hoped it wasn't the Dursleys.

But it won't be. That would be good luck, something they'll never have again...

Messages through our mutual friend will eventually reach us, should you ever need to contact us. If not, we'll be in touch again around Christmas.

Have a good summer and fall,

GGL

Danger flipped through the photos. Aletha was shown in one or two of these, due to the subtle hints Dumbledore had been dropping about her ring for the past two months.

Oh, he knows all right.

But still better to be careful.

Let's see how he takes this. If he doesn't give anything away, I think at Christmas it'll be safe to let him see everyone together. She smiled, thinking of the fun they'd have, decorating the tree, baking cookies, getting everyone presents...

As if we're not having fun now. Every day is an adventure, after all.

She added that as a postscript.

Let him figure that one out.

And more adventure to come, if my dreams are right. More cubs for our Pack, and more danger for us...

You're enough Danger for me, Remus said from behind her.

She gasped, almost spilling the ink. Don't DO that!

Sorry, my love, I thought you could hear me. Remus leaned over her shoulder to read the letter. So what does "Every day is an adventure" mean?

As if on cue, there was a smash from the next room, and a little voice said, "Oops."

"Oops." The number one word you do NOT want to hear in conjunction with a crash.

I'll get it, Remus said.

“I got it,” Sirius called from the other room. “Nothing terrible, just the glass on a picture. Hey, Harry, Neenie, watch this. Reparo!”

Danger shook her head, smiling. That’s what.

I see. What about this? Remus turned his face toward hers and leaned closer. There was a pause.

Well, yes, that too, Danger admitted.
(A/N: Having fun yet?)

Next chapter: “You’re WHAT?” Coming soon to a website near you!

Thanks as always, everyone! Your reviews are my inspiration to work through my mountains of homework!)

Chapter 15: You're WHAT?

Tuesday, August 17, began like any other day at the Marauders' Den (a name coined by Sirius in jest, which had stuck). The Pack awakened slowly, enjoying the morning and the company of each other. The positions in which the cubs were found were compared to the ones in which they had begun the night, because they were always different, and almost always amusing.

On this particular morning, for instance, Harry was lying on top of Danger, which wouldn't have been nearly so funny if Danger hadn't been sleeping on her side. "He looks like he's sleeping on a balance beam," Aletha said, touching one of Harry's limply hanging arms.

"Good thing he didn't have a nightmare," Remus commented. "The way he screams, Danger wouldn't have been able to hear anything in that ear for a couple of days."

"He hasn't had one for a while," Sirius said. "At least three days, I think. Nights, rather."

"Neither have you." Aletha wound her arms around Sirius. "If this keeps up, we'll be able to go back to separate sleeping quarters soon."

"And why would you want to do that?" Sirius asked innocently.

Aletha whispered something in his ear. Sirius' eyebrows rose, and a speculative smile appeared on his face. "I like the sound of that," he said, pulling her into his lap and bending down to kiss her.

"I'll get the paper," Remus said, shaking his head. "Don't wake anyone up. And don't forget it's a weekday."

He might as well not have spoken for all the notice they took. Later that day, Remus was playing "broomstick" with Harry, holding him out at arms' length, belly down, and "flying" him around the house. Hermione hadn't liked the game when he tried it with her, so she was

tucked into a corner of their front room, playing with a baby doll. Harry, on the other hand, never wanted to stop playing.

James' son all over. We'll have to go to Hogsmeade some time, the meadows outside town are safe to fly undisguised in. Teach Danger to fly, and take Harry up – he'll love it.

He zoomed Harry down the hallway in the Whites' side of the house that led from their back room, where they denned (Aletha's back room was her music room) to the front room. There were three doors in the hall – the one on his left led to the kitchen, which had a nice view of the house next door, and the other two, both on his right, led to the ground floor bathroom and the coat closet. He glanced into the bathroom and chuckled, as he always did, at the message Danger had written on the wall above the toilet: "Put It Down."

"Hi, Neenie!" Harry shouted as Remus "flew" him into the front room and landed him.

"Hi," Hermione said briefly, then returned to her doll. Harry grabbed a bucket of blocks and sat down near her, dumping them out and sorting through them, starting a tower.

Whew. He's tired of it for the moment. Good. Remus rolled his shoulders. He's getting heavier. Which is good, in theory, but it's hard on my arms!

He went up the stairs, which were along the outside wall, and paused at the top. The normal sounds of the house mingled in his ears: the noise of Harry's blocks, Hermione singing to her doll, and the rhythmic clicking of Sirius' typewriter keys...

Of all the hobbies for him to take up, writing wasn't one I would have picked... but he seems to have taken to it, and far be it from me to stop him doing what he wants.

Sirius had come across Danger's typewriter in one of the upstairs bedrooms and been fascinated by it. She had taught him to type, and soon he was spending several hours every day at the machine,

tapping out – what, Remus wondered? Sirius rarely showed what he did to anyone, at least not until he was sure it was perfect.

So, we'll find out when we find out.

Another sound caught his ear.

Someone was crying.

Not one of the children, he could see them and they were both perfectly happy. It sounded like a woman, but Aletha and Danger were both supposed to be at work...

He reached for Danger's presence in his mind and found it almost entirely blocked. He could just sense her, and the emotion predominating her mind – grief, old grief suddenly fresh...

What's wrong? he sent, as gently as he could. Where are you?

A sniffle, audible even mentally. Guest bedroom, our side.

Remus went to the indicated door and tried the knob. It was locked, but before he could get his wand out, Danger opened it herself. Her eyes were slightly red, but she was smiling. Should have known I couldn't hide for long.

Why aren't you at work?

I called off. I couldn't go to work, not today.

What's today, love?

She beckoned him into the room and closed the door behind him. The room was somewhat cluttered with the things they hadn't found room for anywhere else, but Danger had cleared the large desk and placed two framed photographs on it. One showed a slightly balding man with warm brown eyes, the other a woman whose bushy brown hair was streaked with silver.

Oh. Remus began to massage Danger's shoulders gently, offering comfort without pressing for anything more.

It was a year ago, today, Danger said, staring at the photographs. I was so happy. I had the perfect life. And then it all collapsed in front of me. They were my world. I loved them so much... and I couldn't help them, I couldn't save them, I wasn't even there...

If you had been there, you would have died with them, Remus thought, but kept it to himself. It wasn't what his love needed to hear.

I know I couldn't have done anything, but I can't help wishing anyway... Hermione will never know them, except through stories and pictures. I can't possibly be as good a mother to her as my mum was. You should have known them, Remus. You would have loved them.

I'm sure I would, Remus said, sliding his hands down along Danger's collarbone and embracing her. They must have been wonderful people, to have daughters like Neenie and you.

Danger turned within the circle of his arms, buried her face in his shirt, and began to cry. He just held her, offering her the comfort of his presence and his love.

That's all any of us have to give. It will have to be enough.

And, eventually, it was.

The full moon in September fell on the 7th. That day also marked a milestone – the first time both Harry and Sirius had gone for a week without a nightmare. It was decided, by general consensus, that it was time to try sleeping in the bedrooms again.

"We're leaving the children in together, right?" Aletha asked.

"Oh, of course," Danger said. "They're both so little, there's no harm, and it's still not a good idea for Harry to be alone at night. Separate beds, though."

You can put them in separate beds, but I'd be willing to bet that more mornings than not, they'll wake up in the same one. Or in one of ours.

"Yes, they do seem to migrate quite a lot at night, don't they," Danger said fondly, as Neenie rearranged herself closer to Harry.

"We'll lock the door if we want privacy," Sirius said. "Until they learn to knock."

"What an excellent idea," Danger said, employing an ultra-bland tone but raising one suggestive eyebrow.

Aletha punched her in the arm. "Go wash your mind out. As if you won't be doing the same."

"Now that's really none of your business."

Sirius sniggered. "Nothing around here stays private for long. Pack life's like that."

"I'd noticed." At least they don't hear this.

Yes, it is rather nice to have a private channel of communication, isn't it. So, do you have any plans tomorrow night?

Nothing that doesn't involve you...

September passed without incident, except Hermione's second birthday on the 19th, which the Pack celebrated just as happily as they had Harry's. Harry, thankfully, was a little more restrained about Neenie's presents than she had been about his, and Neenie, for her part, was less free with distributing her birthday cake than Harry had been.

I thought I'd never get it off the ceiling after his party, Aletha recalled, smiling to herself as she brushed her teeth. It was October now, October 16, a Saturday, and the Pack had plans to go up to Hogsmeade for the day.

A knock sounded in the bathroom, but it wasn't on the door. Aletha opened the medicine cabinet to face Danger, looking through her own cabinet in the other master bathroom. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Would you happen to have a feminine hygiene product on hand?"

"I do. Maxi or mini?"

"Maxi, please."

Aletha extracted the needed product from a package under the sink and passed it through. "Here you are."

"Thank you ever so." Danger closed the cabinet, and Aletha did the same.

Come to think of it, I'm late. I should have needed one of those last week.

I wonder...

She glanced over her shoulder into the bedroom, where Sirius was still asleep.

Oh, no way. Not this soon. It can't be. I have to be wrong.

But there was a way to find out...

She slipped into the bedroom and picked up her wand, lying next to Sirius' on the dresser, then returned to the bathroom and locked herself in. I do not need to be discovered doing this.

"Revelare Ventris," she said softly. A fine gold mist sprayed from the end of her wand and hung in the air, in a roughly spherical shape. Aletha took a deep breath and blew on the mist.

It turned blue.

I was right.

An incredulous smile beginning on her face, Aletha looked down at herself, at her belly, so deceptively flat at the moment.

I'm pregnant.

We're going to have a baby.

What is Sirius going to say? Or do, for that matter?

Come to think of that, what am I going to do? How do I explain this at work? They don't even know I'm married, I can't very well ask for maternity leave!

Cross that bridge when you come to it, Letha. First things first.

Inform the father.

Her smile grew.

Wish I had a camera. This will be priceless.

"Padfoot, love," she called quietly as she came back into the bedroom. "Wake up, I have something to tell you."

"Mmmph?"

"No, you have to be awake for this. Come on, wake up."

"No."

"You want me to conjure some ice down your back?"

"No!" Sirius sat up quickly, facing Aletha, who had established herself at the bottom of the bed. "All right, I'm awake. What's this big thing you have to tell me?"

Aletha took a deep breath. Better not dance around it. Just tell him.

“Sirius, I’m pregnant.”

I was right. That’s the dumbest he’s looked in years. It’s right up there with the look on his face when I told him I’d go out with him...

“You’re WHAT?”

“Pregnant. With your child. We’re going to be parents.” Aletha grinned. “Harry and Hermione get a little brother. Or a little sister. Understand yet?”

“How did this happen?” Sirius said, still looking bewildered.

Aletha burst out laughing. “Somehow I don’t think you need a lecture on the birds and the bees!” she managed to say.

“That is not what I meant and you know it. I... I meant... oh dammit, never mind what I meant, c’mere!” He grabbed her hand and pulled her over on top of him, pulling her mouth to his for a long, passionate kiss. “I love you more than ever,” he said when they came up for air. He stroked her stomach. “My child. No, our child. We’re going to have a baby!”

They were both grinning now, sharing the joy of a new life begun. Danger was taking a tray of drop scones out of the oven when Sirius and Aletha got down to the kitchen. Harry and Neenie were sitting on Remus’ lap, “helping” him do the crossword in the Daily Prophet.

“Good morning,” Remus said, looking over the paper. “You two look very happy about something.”

“We have an announcement,” Sirius said importantly.

Do you think... Danger murmured silently.

“I’m pregnant,” Aletha said, beaming.

Sure enough.

“Congratulations,” Remus said, removing the children from his lap so he could give Aletha a hug and slap Sirius on the back. “Didn’t take you long, Padfoot.”

Sirius grinned, sliding one arm around Aletha’s waist. “With such beauty to inspire me, how could I fail?” He tickled his wife, making her squeal.

“I’m so happy for you,” Danger said, embracing her friend. “When?”

“June, I think,” Aletha said. “We’ll have to get it checked out, but I should be about a month along.”

“Who’s going to do the checking?” Remus asked. “A Muggle doctor, or a Healer?”

“That’s a good question.” Aletha went to the table and sat down, and they all followed her. Neenie climbed into her lap, as Harry went back to Remus. “If I go to a Healer, even with confidentiality, someone’s bound to see me coming and going, and that’s how rumors start.”

“But Muggle doctors don’t always know how to treat magical illnesses,” Sirius said.

“Pregnancy is hardly a magical illness,” Aletha pointed out tartly. “No, I think a gynecologist would be the safest way to go, in this case.”

“We can do some research tomorrow,” Remus said. “Today, we have an expedition to go on.”

“After breakfast,” said Danger firmly. “I’m hungry.”

“Oh dear.” Aletha swallowed. “And I’m not. Excuse me.”

Hermione slid to the floor with an indignant sound as Aletha ran for the bathroom.

“Oh boy, morning sickness,” Danger said. “You’re in for a fun time, Sirius.”

“So I see.” Sirius got up and followed his wife.

“Well, we can eat at any rate,” Remus said, transferring Harry into his booster seat (the high chairs had been put away).

“Will we still be able to go?” Danger asked, doing the same with Neenie.

“Probably. Letha may want to stay home, but the rest of us can go.” As it happened, Aletha felt better after her brief “call to Ralph on the porcelain phone”, as Danger put it, and the journey to Hogsmeade went forward as planned. Luckily for them, it was a Hogwarts weekend, so the village was crowded and they went mostly unnoticed.

Aletha Flooed there first, with Sirius in dog form reared up against her so as not to hurt himself. Danger went next, alone in case she got lost, and only when her slightly giddy Made it reached Remus did he scoop up Harry and Hermione, one in each arm, and step into the fire, saying, “The Three Broomsticks!”

The children squealed gleefully as they spun through the emerald flames – apparently they thought it was some kind of ride. Remus almost fell at the other end, the weight in his arms unbalancing him, but Danger and Aletha were ready, one on each side, and caught him. And, he noticed, Padfoot was standing just beyond them and probably would have taken his weight if the women had dropped him.

“Thanks,” he said, brushing some ash off his cloak. “Shall we?”

Aletha took Sirius’ lead, Danger Hermione’s hand, and Remus Harry’s. They had decided to go out flying first, then have lunch, and afterwards tour the village. But for flying, they needed broomsticks.

Madame Sylvia’s Broomstick Rental to the rescue.

The place was just off the main street, a nice little shop, well-known to the students who didn't have their own brooms. You could rent brooms there by the hour, the day, the week, or the month. There was even a kids' section, with the toy broomsticks that would only go about two feet off the ground and five miles an hour, and had built-in Safety Charms so the child couldn't fall off.

"Two adult, one child, please," Remus said to the pleasant red-haired woman behind the counter.

"Certainly, love. How long?"

"Hmm, three hours?"

"All right. That's two Sickles an hour for each adult broom, and one for the child, so that comes to fifteen Sickles altogether."

The money exchanged hands, and they left the shop carrying two sturdy Comet models, not the fastest things in the world but reliable, and one little Meteorite.

You do realize, the children will both want to ride that little broom, Danger said.

I doubt it. Not when I'm taking Harry riding with me.

You could be right.

"I can teach you the basics, Danger, and Padfoot can watch Neenie while she plays," Aletha said, stopping and unclipping Sirius' collar, since they had left the village behind and were now out in open fields. Sirius sat down and scratched where it had been, then shook vigorously.

"I'll be ready as soon as we get Neenie set up on that," Danger said, waving at the Meteorite.

Remus handed it to her and put down one of the Comets for them to use, then picked the other one back up and looked down at Harry's eager face. "Want to go flying, Greeneyes?"

Harry jumped up and down, shouting, "F'ying, f'ying!"

"All right, just wait a second." Remus held the broom in the air at mounting height and felt it activate. He let go; it hung there, waiting. He scooped Harry up and put him on the broom, making the little boy squeal with delight. Using his wand, he tethered Harry to the broom with a fairly short, elastic cord – not that I'm planning to drop him, but accidents happen, and he's a squirmer. Then he mounted the broom himself and kicked off.

Harry shrieked with joy as they ascended. Remus looked down and saw Neenie cautiously maneuvering her toy broomstick around Sirius, who was watching her with what looked like amusement (canine emotions were hard to read from above). Danger had just got the broom to respond to her command of "Up", and was now practicing how to mount.

"Fasser, Moony!" Harry yelled.

Definitely James' son. "Faster it is," Remus said, laughing, and urged the broom onwards.

For nearly an hour, they circled, swooped, and dived. Harry never seemed to get tired of it. On one dive, he actually let go of the broom – and his balance never wavered. Remus had an arm around him at all times, but Harry didn't seem to need the help. It was as if he had been born to fly.

Which he may have been. James always claimed he never had a flying teacher – he just got on his broom and flew. Whereas my father had to work with me for weeks before I was anything like competent.

Danger came up to meet them after about an hour and flew a wobbly circle around them. "This is fun," she said as she pulled alongside. "But I keep thinking I'm going to fall off."

“Better stay close to the ground for a while, then,” Remus recommended. “Time to land, anyway. Letha might want a turn.”

“After being sick this morning? I doubt it.”

“Well, she Flooed already today, and that’s worse on your stomach than flying is.”

“It’s a completely different kind of feeling. Traveling by Floo is spinning. This is up and down.”

Arguing companionably, they descended, slowly so Danger wouldn’t lose control.

“You know, we should have got these for them,” Danger said as she tried to remove Neenie from the toy broom; the little girl had enjoyed herself, judging by her screech of indignation as Danger pried her fingers loose. “For their birthdays.”

“Christmas is coming,” Remus pointed out.

High in the sky, two broomsticks circled one another. Aletha had indeed wanted a turn. So had Sirius. No one was in sight, no one was likely to come, so it was safe enough.

Life, Remus mused, is very good.

(A/N: Attention readers: I need input! Do you want the Dursleys to stay part of the story, or should I let them fade miserably into the sunset? I have ideas for both ways... so let me know what you think! Also, if you've put this story on a C2, thank you, no objections, but could you please let me know about it? Thanks!

Thanks to StB for letting me borrow her name for the house... though I am using it rather differently...

The responses to this story just stun me. I’m amazed that so many different people all seem to like my work. Thank you a million times, everyone!

Next chapter, "Beautiful Is the Child", coming soon! Maybe not as soon as you want, but soon!)

Chapter 16: Beautiful Is the Child

Remus awoke with an odd sense of foreboding, as if something awful was going to happen today.

As he came farther into wakefulness, he remembered. It wasn't so much that something would happen today, but that something had happened, on this day a year ago...

"Halloween," he said quietly.

Halloween? So it is. Danger's mind-voice was filled with understanding. Come here.

Remus turned over and found himself swamped by a fierce hug.

You held me when I needed to cry, she reminded him as his own eyes began to sting. And now I do the same for you...

"I'm glad today is Sunday," Aletha said hoarsely, blotting her eyes. "Otherwise, I would have had to take off work."

Danger had taken it upon herself to keep the children happy all day, allowing the three members of the Pack who had actually known James Potter and Lily Evans to reminisce together. Probably inevitably, the reminiscing led to more tears.

But this is the good kind of grief. Not the kind we had in the first few months, when it seemed as if everything we had died with James and Lily.

Now we have each other, and we can mourn them without being afraid to lose ourselves in the grief. Because there will always be someone there to bring us out again.

Remus took a tissue from the box on the coffee table. "Your turn, Padfoot," he said. Aletha had come up with the plan that they swap stories about either James or Lily, the idea being to see who knew the most that the others didn't.

“Right.” Sirius coughed a little. “Did you two ever know that James once got stuck half-transformed?”

“Well, since I didn’t know about you being Animagi, that would be a no,” Aletha said wryly as Remus shook his head.

“He did. And a right idiot he looked, running around starkers with a fur coat from his chest to his knees and antlers on his head.”

And this is how they would want to be remembered. With laughter amid the tears.

Den-sleeping was now reserved for full moons and special occasions, of which Halloween night had been deemed to be one. Harry and Neenie were waiting impatiently on the mattresses when Remus and Danger arrived. Sirius and Aletha came down shortly afterwards, and the Pack gathered into a loose circle, the adults around the outside and the children in the middle.

“Look at these pictures, children,” Aletha said, holding out two photographs, one magical, one Muggle.

Harry and Hermione looked at them curiously. “Who that?” Hermione asked, pointing at the magical picture.

“Lily Potter, Harry’s mum. See how she has green eyes like Harry?” Remus said.

“Who that?” Harry asked, indicating the Muggle photo.

“David Granger, Neenie’s dad. He used to call her ‘Oh-my-knee’.” Danger clutched at her own knee, making the children laugh.

“Is’at my dad?” Harry asked, pointing at the magical photo, where James and Lily were waving at the camera. Occasionally, James would reach over and slyly poke Lily, and she would slap at him playfully, laughing.

“Yes, that’s your father James,” Sirius said.

“And this is our mum, Hermione,” Danger said, pointing the woman out. “Her name was Rose. She loved her garden very much, but she loved you even more. She used to take you outside in the springtime and lay you on a blanket while she dug in the garden.”

“Where she?” Hermione asked, looking at the picture.

Danger sighed. “She died, sweetheart. Her and your dad, and Harry’s mum and dad too, they all died.”

“What ‘died’ mean?” Harry asked curiously.

The adults exchanged who-wants-to-handle-this-one looks. Aletha took the job. “They went far away, Harry. Very far away. And they can’t come back. But they love you, and they’re watching over you from far away. You remember that, both of you. Your parents loved you, and they’re always watching over you.”

Hermione nodded. “Why my par’nts not move?” she asked after a moment.

Remus explained, as best he could to a two-year-old, the difference between magical and Muggle photography.

Neenie was not impressed. “It not fair,” she said with a distinct hint of whine in her voice.

“Whiners don’t get bedtime stories,” Danger said as if to herself, looking at the ceiling.

“So’y,” Neenie apologized quickly.

“Tell story, Padfoot?” Harry asked, establishing himself on his godfather’s lap.

“You forgot the magic word,” Sirius said in a teasing tone.

“Alo'mora!” Hermione giggled, waving her hand as if she held a wand.

“Pleeeeeeease?” Harry said beseechingly.

“All right. This is the story of the day the Slytherin common room got toilet-papered...”

Aletha’s birthday was November 28, while Danger’s was December 4. The Pack split the difference and celebrated on December 1.

“I know I can’t buy you what you really want,” Sirius said to Aletha.

“That’s assuming you know what I really want.”

“Oh, I know.”

“Fine, tell me.”

“You want toilet-training to be over with.”

Remus chuckled. “He’s got you there, Letha.”

“But I bought you a little something anyway,” Sirius said, casually tossing Aletha a small package. “Happy birthday.”

Aletha opened her present and gasped. “Earrings to match my wedding ring are not a little something, Sirius!”

“No, but they will look good on you.”

“Show-off rich kid,” Remus said, punching his friend lightly on the shoulder. “Happy birthday, love.”

Danger opened her birthday card. Inside, Remus had written a note.

I, Remus Lupin, promise to take my wife, Gertrude “Danger” Granger-Lupin, to Ollivander’s as soon as is convenient for both of us and buy her a wand, and commence her magical training as soon as possible thereafter.

“It’s exactly what I wanted,” Danger said, grinning. “After what Aletha wanted, of course.”

Remus’ gift to Aletha was a new book of sheet music, and Sirius’ gift to Danger a broomstick – a Nimbus One Thousand, fairly fast but very safe.

“I would say thank you, if you hadn’t put a seat belt on it,” Danger said, glaring at Sirius.

Aletha had got Danger some new cookie sheets, since she had noticed Danger’s starting to bend, and Danger had bought Aletha an enormous box of chocolate-covered strawberries, which she knew were her friend’s greatest weakness.

“You evil woman,” Aletha said in tones of longing.

“If you don’t eat them, they’ll go bad,” Danger pointed out, ever so politely, earning herself a smack upside the head with a wad of wrapping paper.

All in all, it was a most satisfactory day.

A gale of giggles trailed in from the den room to the kitchen, where Danger was doing paperwork. “What are you up to in there?” she called out.

“We’re just playing catch with Harry,” Sirius answered, with laughter in his tone.

“All right.” Danger went back to her work.

For about fifteen seconds.

Then something about the phrase penetrated her mind.

A game of catch shouldn’t cause that much laughing...

Care to elaborate on that, love? she asked.

Well, see for yourself. Remus opened his eyes to her.

Sure enough, they were playing catch. With Harry.

At least they have enough sense to do it over a mattress.

Hermione was running back and forth, giggling and trying to keep up with the flights of her pack-brother as Remus and Sirius tossed Harry between them. The little boy was obviously enjoying himself – his cheeks were pink with laughing, and his eyes sparkled.

Danger sighed.

What's a woman to do?

She went and got the camera.

Albus Dumbledore's most anticipated Christmas package arrived several days after the actual holiday, on December 29 to be exact. It was a rather thicker envelope than he had been expecting, but that was explained when he opened it and, instead of a letter, out fell an audio tape, along with the expected photographs.

That's right, I showed Aletha my latest acquisition the last time she was here. Dumbledore had got hold of a Muggle tape player and made the necessary adjustments to allow it to work magically, rather than on batteries. He was slowly accumulating taped versions of his favorite music, and appreciated the convenience.

After all, you can hardly ask an orchestra to play the same piece five times.

He slid the tape in and pressed the play button.

There was a moment of the hissing sound that meant a home recording, with murmurs in the background. Then a small, slightly hesitant voice spoke, a little too loudly, as if the speaker were unsure what to do with the microphone.

"Happy Ch'istmas, P'fessor Dumbledore." There was a pause, then, "Moony, what's a p'fessor?"

Dumbledore chuckled along with the recorded laughter on the tape.

“The voice you have just heard,” said an amused female voice, “was that of Harry Potter, age almost two-and-a-half.”

“And more trouble than he’s worth,” called out a deep male voice from somewhere in the background.

There was a smacking noise.

“Ow.”

“And that was a certain troublemaker whom I have no need to name, I’m sure,” the female voice went on. Dumbledore knew it, though he had, up till now, heard it only in a dream. “Happy Christmas from the Pack. I will be your narrator through the photographs, which are numbered for your viewing pleasure. If you would please turn over photograph number one, now.”

Dumbledore did so, and laughed out loud.

“Here you see Padfoot and Moony playing catch with Harry – a prime example of the ways in which the English language can be stretched. If you would turn to photograph number two.”

Dumbledore frowned a little. What’s happened to Aletha? She looks different...

Aletha’s voice came on the tape. “A Blessed Event is expected in June, Professor,” she said a little shyly. “I’ve been using Concealment Charms at the office for obvious reasons, but we thought it was time you knew. Harry and Hermione are excited over their new little brother or sister. Harry, in particular, thinks it’s unfair that we have to wait until summer to find out if the baby will be a boy or a girl.”

Danger’s voice returned. “Photograph number three is a picture of the unfortunate consequences of a decision by two small members of this Pack to wash their hair with ketchup.”

They look as if they've been scalped. Dumbledore chuckled again.

All too soon, the tape was winding down. "Oh, but don't forget to turn this tape over," Danger wrapped up. "We've put a bit of a surprise for you on the other side. Have a happy Christmas and a good New Year, and we'll let you know when the baby's born."

Dumbledore ejected the tape, turned it over, and pressed play again.

A piano played a short introduction, and a woman began to sing the French carol "Bring A Torch, Jeanette, Isabella", with its lines about the beauty of the Holy Mother and Child.

"Joy to the World", "Away in a Manger", "O Come All Ye Faithful", one after another, they came from the player, sometimes as solos, sometimes in harmony. But the one Dumbledore liked best came last.

It was "Silent Night", with Harry and Hermione singing along. The Pack saw in the New Year in the traditional way, by staying up until midnight (the children fell asleep around ten) and drinking toasts in champagne (Aletha's non-alcoholic, of course).

"To success in toilet-training," Danger said to start, making everyone laugh.

"To better sleep for all," Aletha said fervently.

"To a new cub for the Pack," was Sirius' contribution.

"To our first full year together," Remus said, raising his glass high.

"Here, here," chorused the rest of the Pack, and drank to a New Year together.

Hermione woke up in the middle of the night, unsure why. She thought there had been a little noise, but she wasn't quite sure.

Then she heard it again. A little squeak, like a mouse. But it wasn't a mouse. She knew what it was.

She picked up her stuffed lion, got out of her bed, and padded over to Harry's.

He rolled over and looked at her, his eyes glinting a little in the moonlight coming in their window. Without saying anything, he flipped his covers down and scooted over.

She climbed up beside him and settled in, pulling the covers up around herself. Harry put his lion next to hers, sandwiched between their bodies, and they went back to sleep together, black hair and brown on the same pillow.

Danger finally got her wand at the end of January – maple and unicorn tail hair, ten and a half inches. While at Diagon Alley, she slipped into Flourish and Blotts and made a few purchases of her own. There were birthdays coming, after all...

To Danger's annoyance, she learned wand-wielding magic slowly, though she showed an aptitude for brewing potions (an art which Aletha taught her, since Remus and Sirius shared a dislike for it). "Oh, I give up," she said in disgust one day, slapping her wand down on the table.

"What, the great rescuer of Harry Potter and wielder of wandless magic, giving up?" Remus teased. "Show some honorary Gryffindor spirit, here, woman." They had crowned her an honorary Gryffindor the day she'd got her wand, with Sirius providing the voice of the Sorting Hat.

"I don't want to," Danger said, pulling a face. "I'm just tired. Tired of everything. Of hiding, and of magic, and... there are days I wish everything was back to the way it used to be. Just me and my parents and Neenie. Living a normal life."

"I'm not sure if I should be insulted or not, here."

"Go ahead. Be insulted. You never are. You're so nice, it's scary."

"All right, fine. I'm insulted."

“Good. I’m insulted too.”

“Insulted at what? I didn’t say anything insulting!”

“That’s what you think!”

“Yes, it is what I think. Would you please tell me if I’m wrong?”

“Yes, of course you’re wrong!”

“What did I say?”

“Figure it out yourself!”

“No!”

“Yes!” Danger stomped out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

“Fine!” Remus yelled after her. “Be that way!”

He turned around to find Aletha looking at him quizzically.

“Don’t ask,” he said, picking up Danger’s wand and his own.

“Don’t need to. You two were obviously overdue.”

“Overdue?”

Aletha shrugged. “Everyone needs to fight occasionally. It’s better than letting the tension just sit there, that’s for sure. Now it’s over, you both got it out, and you have making up to look forward to.”

Remus gave a short laugh. “I never thought of it that way before.”

“You never dated anyone before.” Aletha sat down heavily – she was almost halfway through her pregnancy, and the added weight was starting to tell on her. “So, now you know.”

“True enough.” I’m sorry, he called silently...

Only to realize that his mental voice had been doubled by another, saying exactly the same thing.

Was that you, or me? Danger asked, tone rich with irony.

It was both of us. But it’s true. I am sorry.

No, I am. It was my fault. I shouldn’t have gone off like that.

Don’t worry about it. As I have just been informed, everyone needs to fight occasionally.

You see, this is what gets on my nerves. Your professor-ish attitude. You get this way sometimes, and it just bothers me...

I didn’t realize. I’ll try to stop.

Thanks. Can I come back downstairs now?

Where are you?

In our bedroom. Why?

I think I’ll come up, instead, if you don’t mind...

“All right, ready for another game?”

Hermione and Harry nodded eagerly.

“We’re out of den. Who am I?”

“Daddy,” Harry said.

“And who’s this?” Remus pointed to Danger.

“Mum,” Neenie said solemnly.

“And who are you?”

“I’m Jamie,” Harry said. “Jamie White.”

“Janie White,” said Neenie. “Jamie’s sister.”

“Very good, both of you. Enough playing for today – bath time!”

“Bath time!” the children squealed in unison, and raced each other to the stairs.

Sirius chuckled as he followed them. “I think we have the only children in the world who like taking baths.”

“Why do you keep working with them like this?” Aletha asked, on the couch with her feet up. “A minor Compulsion Charm does the job just fine.”

Remus sighed. “I hate doing that. It’s so close to Dark magic. Besides, we can’t use Compulsions on them forever – most kids learn to throw them off around five. Better to have them trained now.”

“Also, it gives them a secret,” Danger said. “Kids love having secrets, knowing things other people don’t know. It makes them feel powerful.”

“True enough – and these kids need that feeling, more than most,” Aletha said, nodding in understanding. “Because there’s a big nasty world out there, and sooner or later, it’s going to come knocking on our door.”

Sirius’ birthday, which had always annoyed him, was February 14.

“And my mother, may she die a horrible death, decided that it would be cute to name me in honor of the day,” he said to Danger on the 13th. “My father talked her out of it as a first name, thank Merlin, but I got saddled with it as a middle name instead...”

“So that’s what the V stands for,” Danger said. She’d seen an old picture of Aletha’s inscribed “SVB loves ACF”, and while she knew

Aletha's middle name was Carina, she had never known Sirius'. Until now. "Sirius Valentine Black."

Sirius groaned. "Do you have to say it?"

"I think it's rather cute," Danger said, smiling at him.

Her gift to him the next day was a book entitled "Get It Out There: How to Get Your Masterpiece Published Now That You've Finally Finished It".

"Is there something you're not telling us?" Aletha asked over the birthday cake.

Sirius flushed slightly. "Well... I have been working on a story. And I think it's pretty good so far, but it's not done yet."

"You'll have to let us see it when it is," Remus said, putting a slice of cake in front of Harry.

Months faded into one another, winter turned to spring. Remus' birthday came and passed, as did April 14, which the Pack celebrated as their collective birthday, the first day they had all spent together. The children finally mastered the skill of using the toilet in mid-May, which gave rise to a larger celebration than any of the birthdays had.

June 1 was a Tuesday, a rainy, gray Tuesday. Aletha was just signing the last of a new batch of parchments having to do with track repairs for the Hogwarts Express when she felt an odd sensation in her stomach.

That's strange. It's not nearly time for lunch yet...

The feeling intensified, and suddenly she knew what was happening.

It would have to happen at work. Of all the places for it to happen, it had to be at work.

She quickly scribbled a memo to Paul Abbott, her immediate superior, saying that she didn't feel well and was taking the rest of the day off,

summoned an owl and sent the message, and was on her feet, making her unsteady way toward the lift.

Please oh please just let me get home, she prayed quietly.

She made it safely to the Atrium, to the Floo fireplaces, and staggered out of her own fireplace, almost falling on top of Hermione, who was playing chase with Harry and Sirius. Her husband hurried to catch her. "Letha, what's wrong?" he asked, face creased with worry.

Aletha smiled, though another twinge in her belly turned it into a wince.

"It's time," she said.

A few hours later, elsewhere in England, a different woman snarled as for the third time that day, a light bulb burned out as soon as she switched it on.

All I want, she thought bitterly, is to raise my son so he can grow up and have a normal life...

Although she didn't know it, Petunia Dursley had just triggered a fresh spurt of life in the Curse which hung over her.

A small bell rang in Albus Dumbledore's office. The Headmaster looked up and smiled. "Come with me, Minerva?" he asked Professor McGonagall, who was having tea with him.

"Oh, Albus, you and that book," she said, putting down her teacup. "You're like a little boy with a magical storybook, I swear, every time there's a new name, you have to go and look..."

"I do enjoy seeing the names of those who will follow in my footsteps," Albus acknowledged, opening the door of the room where resided the quill that recorded the name of every child in the British Isles with magical powers.

"That's odd," said Minerva, stopping short. A large number 2 was hovering over the book where the quill was scratching. "What does it mean?"

“Twins, quite possibly,” said Albus, stepping forward to look at the book. “Or simply two children born close together...”

He ran his finger down the column of names and stopped.

“Now this is very interesting,” he said softly. “Very interesting indeed. Fascinating, that these names should keep company in this way.”

Minerva shook her head and sighed. “Albus, if you’re going to be cryptic, I have papers to grade.”

“Forgive me, Minerva, I meant no disrespect. Would you care to see?”

“Honestly, no, but thank you.”

“Very well. Shall we resume our conversation, then?”

A few hours later, Aletha’s screech owl, Maya, flew in through his window with a pink envelope in her beak. Dumbledore thanked the bird and opened the announcement, written in Danger’s familiar handwriting.

It’s a Girl!

Sirius Black and Aletha Freeman-Black

Are proud to announce

The birth of their first child

Meghan Lily Black

On June 1, 1983

At 4:13 pm

At the bottom, in Sirius’ handwriting, was a note.

She's beautiful, Professor. We'll send you photos in July.

"I'm sure she is," Dumbledore said softly, rather glad Minerva hadn't wanted to see the two newest names in the book of magical children:

Meghan Lily Black

Dudley Ursinus Dursley

(A/N: Fun with initials and names...

Meghan means "pearl", which is her birthstone, and should be reminding you of some poetic references in Chapter 12... and I'm surprised no one remembered that poem, with all your questions about "will the baby be a boy or a girl" – I outright said they'd have a daughter. :hides as readers stampede back to Chapter 12 to look at the poem again:

Note to all anonymous reviewers, and to those who don't have me on Author Alert: Check often. I update FAST. It's my gift to you, my loving and wonderful reviewers!

So, now you know – it's a girl!

Next chapter, "Discovered", coming soon... :plays suspenseful music:)

Chapter 17: Discovered

In the middle of a difficult passage, Remus heard shrieking.

Oh no, here we go again...

Neenie burst through the door of the music room, screaming, with Harry in hot pursuit. Remus just had time to put his violin and bow down on the top of the piano before Neenie skidded to a halt behind him, panting. Harry was standing in the middle of the room, fists clenched.

“What now, you two?” Remus asked.

“She hit me!”

“He ripped my book!”

“Why did you rip Hermione’s book, Harry?”

“Was an asident,” Harry muttered, looking sulky. “An’I said sorry.”

“Did not,” Neenie said, sticking out her tongue.

“Did too.”

“Did not!”

“Did too!”

“Stop,” Remus ordered. “Harry, even if you already said sorry, say it again.”

“No.”

“I said, do it.”

Harry made a face. “Sorry, Neenie.”

“Now, Hermione, say sorry to Harry for hitting him.”

“Sorry, Harry.”

“Now hug and make up.”

The hug resembled Greco-Roman wrestling more than anything, but it would do.

“I’m a snake,” Harry announced when he let Neenie go. “Hiss, hiss, hiss.”

“That’s fine. Go be a snake upstairs.”

“No.” Harry sat down on Remus’ left foot and wrapped his arms and legs around Remus’ leg. “I’m a snake on you. Hiss, hiss.”

“Me too, me too!” Neenie took possession of Remus’ other foot and started hissing, in between giggles.

Remus folded his arms and considered his options.

I am, more or less, stuck here. I could try walking, but if I give them a ride, they’ll think this is a great game and do it again. Same thing goes for levitating them off. So the prudent thing to do would be...

Call for help.

“SIRIUS!”

“WHAT?” floated down the stairs.

“YOU MAY WANT TO SEE THIS!”

Remus kept it vague on purpose. If there’s one thing Sirius can’t resist, it’s a mystery.

That, and a chance to laugh at me.

Sure enough, it wasn't more than a few seconds before he heard Sirius descending the stairs, in his usual herd-of-hippogriffs manner.

"What's up, Moony?" Sirius stopped in the doorway of the music room, took in the scene, and started laughing.

Perfect. Under cover of Sirius' laughter, Remus leaned over and whispered something to the children. Harry and Hermione promptly let go of him, scuttled over to Sirius, and attached themselves to his legs.

"What are they doing?" Sirius asked in bewilderment, looking down at the hissing children sitting on his feet.

"They're snakes. They were being snakes on me, but now they're snakes on you. Thank you for the distraction, and good luck getting them off."

"Why, you sneaky little two-timing double-crossing werewolf..."

"Ask me if I care," Remus said, grinning, as he picked up his violin again.

Sirius growled at him as he began the piece over. "Why have you been working on that all day, anyway?"

"Because Aletha wants to learn a few duet pieces, and this is one of them. I wanted to get some practice in before she gets home. And speaking of home, Danger's due back any minute. Why don't you go get the cubs ready to go out?"

"Hey, that's right. Harry, Neenie, you wanna go to Diagon Alley?"

"Yeah!" both children yelled.

"Well, we can't take snakes to Diagon Alley, everyone would get scared. You have to be people to go to Diagon Alley."

“We’re people,” Neenie said, letting go immediately and standing up.

“Yeah, we’re people,” Harry seconded, also standing up. “We gonna get ice cream?”

“If you’re good, maybe.”

“ICE CREAM!” shouted two small voices in unison.

“You certainly do,” said Danger, appearing in the archway and kneeling down to intercept a pair of flying-tackle hugs. “Hello, everyone, and I see the secret trip to Diagon Alley is no longer a secret.”

“Hey, it got them off me,” Sirius said, chuckling. “Wait until you hear what they’re up to now...”

Hello, love, how was your day? Danger asked, while making all the right noises in response to Sirius and both children all talking to her at once.

Work this morning was fine, the afternoon was peaceful until just a minute or two ago. It will be nice to have the house to myself for a while, though.

We’ll leave as soon as we’re ready. The children will need a few minutes to get used to Sirius’ new face.

Take your time, I’m in no rush.

Meghan Lily Black, age two and a half months, opened her long-lashed, enormous eyes and blinked up curiously at the world.

Her long-lashed, enormous, silver-gray eyes.

Just like her father’s.

The Pack had been as good as their word, sending photographs of Meghan with their usual package in July, but this, the real thing,

made the photographs look tawdry. "Such a little beauty," Albus Dumbledore said softly, cradling her in his arms. "All children are beautiful, of course, but you and Sirius seem to have quite a heartbreaker in the making, here..."

Aletha laughed. "And, of course, if you said that anywhere but here, or the Den, people would look at you very oddly. Once they got done screaming."

What a life this little girl will know. Raised in hiding, as part of a 'Pack' and a younger sister to Harry Potter, with her father supposedly the worst criminal Azkaban has ever held...

"Yes, well, the story you came up with will suit quite well, I think," Dumbledore said, handing Meghan back to her mother.

It would have been very hard for Aletha to conceal the presence of a new baby in her life, so she had decided not even to try. Instead, she had spread the word around for a few months prior to Meghan's birth that she was planning to adopt a magical but Muggle-born orphan, as soon as one appeared in Dumbledore's book. Meghan would be the result of that search, her resemblance to Aletha merely a coincidence.

As to how many will believe it... there will be little reason to doubt. Very few people know Aletha was briefly ill at the start of June, and even if they do, all that will emerge are rumors and gossip. The worst that will happen is that her reputation will be smirched.

He mentioned this, and Aletha snorted. "I couldn't care less about my reputation at this point, Professor," she said, sliding Meghan back into the baby sling she wore around her. "As long as no one guesses both that she's mine by birth and the identity of her father – which they won't – I don't care what anyone says."

A wise attitude. Dumbledore rose to see her out. "Are you going back to the Ministry, or home?"

“Oh, home, definitely,” Aletha said. “All my work’s caught up with, so there’s no real reason for me to sit at my desk for an hour. If they need me, they can always firecall.”

“True enough. Have a pleasant afternoon, Aletha.”

“You too, Professor. The Marauders’ Den!” Aletha announced as she tossed Floo powder into the fireplace and stepped in, holding the sling, with Meghan in it, close with the other arm. The green flames whirled her out of sight, and Dumbledore returned to his desk.

“This falls out better than I could devise.” So said the Bard, and so say I. It takes a wise man to admit when he was wrong... but Harry is happy and healthy and unspoiled, likewise Hermione, and Meghan bids fair to grow up the same.

As long as they remain safely hidden, nothing more needs to be done. Harry, hair lightened to blond, sat happily on Sirius’ shoulders as they browsed through Quality Quidditch Supplies together. Sirius’ looks had been distinctly altered, giving him a rounder face, much lighter hair, and a slightly puzzled expression. He didn’t care much for the alterations, but it was the only way he could go out in public, and he did rather enjoy his trips to Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade.

Once, for fun, the Pack had even gone to the Museum of Magical Curiosities, and Sirius had compared his wand to the one on display. They were almost utterly identical, except that Aletha had missed the little nick that his wand had incurred when rat-Peter had bitten the end of it once. He had had to convince her not to fix the mistake on the spot, reminding her that no one else would be likely to notice.

Suddenly, he realized he was hearing screaming. Had been hearing it, for that matter, for the past minute or so.

Familiar screaming, at that.

Oh Merlin, what’s Hermione mad about now?

A very put-out-looking Danger was standing outside the store, holding a red-faced Neenie by one arm. The little girl was shrieking inarticulately and yanking at Danger's hand, apparently trying to get away.

"She pulled down an entire display in Flourish and Blotts," Danger said when Sirius was close enough to hear. "I told her I was taking her straight home, with no ice cream, and this was the result. She's overtired, obviously. See you there?"

"Of course."

Sirius had to laugh as Danger expertly picked up her sister, slung her over one shoulder, and walked off in the direction of the Leaky Cauldron, ignoring the fists drumming on her back and the attention she was getting from the crowd.

"Padfoot, we get ice cream?" Harry asked from atop his shoulders.

"I think we can manage that, Jamie-boy," Sirius said. "You've been good so far today."

The screams were what attracted his attention first. Almost everyone in the street turned to see what it was.

When he saw it was just a little girl, he was about to walk away, but the crowd was thick, and he had to stay where he was for a moment, hidden behind one rank of people but close enough to hear what the man and woman said to one another.

The man's voice struck a chord in his memory. The bark-like laugh only added to it. But when the little boy addressed the man as Padfoot, he knew.

Sirius Black.

His wife's cousin was not only alive and free, but still in England, and either in possession of a wand, to change his looks so drastically, or friends with someone who was. And also in possession of a child. A boy, of an extremely suspicious age...

I wonder what the reward will be for finding the most wanted criminal and the most sought-after child in Britain at the same time.

Lucius Malfoy smiled, and laid his plan.

At Florian Fortescue's, Harry attacked a cone of chocolate peanut butter ripple while Sirius started in on a double-decker triple chocolate monster.

Yes, we are ruining our dinners. That's what trips to Diagon Alley are for.

Besides, what good are kids if you can't spoil them every now and again?

Very few people knew of the existence of the spell Lucius planned to use. It had been invented by the Dark Lord himself, in the final days of the war, and would probably be illegal if anyone in the lawmaking business knew about it. It was an Apparation Disrupter – the next time the witch or wizard it was cast on tried to Apparate, no matter where they thought they were going, they would end up in a place of the caster's choosing.

Pity it's so complex most wizards can't use it. Severus Snape might have been able to manage, but the Dark Lord was unsure of his loyalty – rightly so, as it turned out – and never taught it to him. I was the only one who could do it reliably.

And now I use it for his glory, to take the brat who made him fall...

Hidden in the shadows of an alley across from the ice cream parlor, Lucius cast the spell – a process which took nearly a minute and a half, no simple one-or-two-word invocation, this – and waited for the two to finish their snack.

Finally, Black took a handful of napkins from the basket on the table and started to wipe the boy's face and hands with them. As he finished, Lucius raised his wand.

“Finite Glamouri!”

Sirius felt something brush his face, like a light breeze, or the touch of a spell...

What was that?

A woman at the next table screamed, pointing at him. "Sirius Black!"

Damn it, my glamour's gone! How'd that happen?

A glance at Harry showed that his godson's disguise was gone as well.

We have to get out of here. NOW!

He snatched up Harry as more screaming erupted around them and thought hard about the Den, starting the familiar process of Apparating –

But then something went wrong. An unfamiliar spell took control of him and flung him, and Harry in his arms, somewhere else entirely...

Sirius took the brunt of the fall, saving Harry the shock. The little boy was frightened but unhurt. Sirius wished he could say the same for himself. Exploring fingers to the back of his head came away bloody.

We can't have gone far. I can still hear the screaming.

"Hold on to me tight, now, Greeneyes," he said to Harry, loosing his hold on the boy to get his wand out with one hand and pull himself to his feet with the other. Might have to fight, if I can't Apparate. Wonder if an Auror got me, or...

"Well, well, Sirius Black, look at you," said a familiar, and thoroughly unwelcome, voice, from the mouth of the dead-end alley in which Sirius now stood.

That is not an Auror.

That is what Aurors go after. Or should.

Lucius double-damn-him Malfoy.

“What do you want?” Sirius asked, starting to advance. Best defense and all that. Harry clung to his side, shivering.

“Why, I want what every decent wizard wants,” Malfoy said, smirking. “I want Sirius Black, mass murderer, to be brought to justice, and Harry Potter to be raised by a proper wizarding family.”

“Like yours?” Sirius spat at Malfoy’s feet. “Dumbledore would never let filth like you touch Harry, much less raise him.”

“Ah, but once I am the hero who conquered Sirius Black,” Malfoy said, his own wand out and ready, “who could deny me anything? Even Albus Dumbledore thinks you guilty, after all. You’ll go back to Azkaban, and my Draco will have a brother...”

“Stupefy!” Sirius shouted, but Malfoy was ready.

“Protego! Petrificus Totalus!”

“Protego!” Malfoy was distracted for a moment by dodging the two reflected spells, and Sirius ran for the open street beyond, hoping to get to somewhere he could Apparate from – Malfoy leapt at him, almost knocking him down – a huge shadow fell across both of them –

A jolt of raw magic shot through him, and Sirius knew no more. The wizard who had stopped the fight shook his head in complete disbelief. “Who’d’a thought,” he muttered to himself. “Who’d’a thought.”

Malfoy he left where he was. He picked up Sirius and hung him over one shoulder, letting his cloak hang down to cover the man’s face. Scooping up the unconscious Harry ever so gently with the other hand and hiding the boy inside his coat, he strode off toward the Leaky Cauldron.

“Dumbledore’ll know what ta do,” he told himself quietly, making his way through the crowd as inconspicuously as he could.

It was occasionally an advantage to be well known. Though he couldn’t be inconspicuous by being part of the crowd, he was inconspicuous merely by being who and what he was. No one questioned him, no one stopped him. He threw Floo powder into the oversized fireplace at the Leaky Cauldron, said “Headmaster’s office, Hogwarts!” and was gone.

Albus Dumbledore looked up from his work as his groundskeeper stumbled out of his fireplace, a man over one shoulder and his hand hidden inside his coat. “Hagrid, what on earth – ”

“I dunno,” Hagrid said, looking frightened and confused. “I dunno, Professor Dumbledore, sir. But I didn’ know where else ter take them...”

He laid an unconscious Harry Potter gently on the Headmaster’s desk and eased Sirius Black into one of the chairs sitting nearby.

“He was duelin’ with Lucius Malfoy,” Hagrid said, staring at Sirius. “Malfoy said sommat about ev’ryone thinkin’ Sirius was guilty...”

“Is he hurt?” Dumbledore asked, rising.

“’ M not sure. Looks like blood on his cloak, though...”

“Excuse me a moment, Hagrid.” Dumbledore went to his fireplace, added Floo powder, and said, “The Marauders’ Den.” Then he knelt down and put his head in the fire.

Aletha and Remus stopped playing as the fire turned green. Remus stepped hastily through the archway, lest it be a call from work, but stopped when he heard Dumbledore’s voice.

“Aletha, can you come at once? There’s been an accident.”

“Harry?” Aletha asked worriedly. “Sirius?”

“Both alive, though unconscious, and Sirius appears to have been slightly injured. There is also a complication. Hagrid has seen them.”

“I’ll come right through,” Aletha said, getting up as Remus reentered the room. They exchanged looks as Dumbledore vanished.

“What do you think?” Aletha asked quietly.

“Hagrid’s not much for keeping secrets,” Remus said ruefully. “But it’s probably too late now. Better that he knows all of it than bits. Go ahead, tell him.”

Hagrid wasn’t sure who he was expecting to come out of the fire – perhaps Remus Lupin, they had been best friends, after all, and Remus had vanished suspiciously close to Sirius’ escape – but Aletha Freeman was only an outside possibility.

And he certainly wasn’t expecting her to run to Sirius, who was just regaining consciousness as she arrived, and first kiss him firmly, then slap him.

“What was that for?”

“For being such an idiot as to get yourself seen!” Aletha said furiously. “What did you do, take your glamour off in front of everyone?”

“It wasn’t my fault!” Sirius protested. “It was Lucius Malfoy – aah – ” He winced as he moved his head. “Headmaster, do you have some tissues or something – ”

Dumbledore conjured a wad of bandage and handed it to Sirius, who pressed it against the back of his head. “Malfoy must have caught on to us somehow,” he said to the room at large. “First he unmasked us – both of us – then he interfered with my Apparation – ”

“Interfered with it?” Dumbledore said. “Are you certain?”

“I’m not such a fool as to Apparate deliberately to a dead-end alleyway with a Death Eater waiting at the only exit!” Sirius retorted. “I was trying to get to the Den. He taunted me some, we dueled, and then something knocked us both down...”

Hagrid was staring at them both. Two contradictory worlds were warring for space in his mind.

“But yer... yer a Death Eater too. Aren’ yeh?”

“No.” Sirius shook his head, very carefully. “I never was. Harry’s in no danger with me, Hagrid.” For some reason, this made Aletha smile. “Hell, I have a daughter of my own, now. With Aletha. She was just born in June. Dumbledore can show you her picture.”

“In fact, I can tell you their whole story, Hagrid,” Dumbledore interrupted smoothly. “If that’s all right with you, of course...”

“Yes,” Aletha said after a glance at Sirius. “You saved them, Hagrid,” she said to him. “You deserve to know.”

“While you take Sirius and Harry home, Aletha,” Dumbledore finished. “They need to rest.”

“Very true.” Aletha helped Sirius to his feet and lifted Harry expertly off the Headmaster’s desk. They made their way to the fire, Aletha added the Floo powder, and they both stepped in at once, Sirius leaning on Aletha. “The Marauders’ Den,” Aletha said clearly, and they vanished into the flames.

Hagrid leaned against the wall, feeling utterly baffled.

“Hagrid?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Come sit down,” Dumbledore said gently. “I’ll try to explain all this.”

Hagrid sat.

“The first thing to know is that Harry Potter is well and happy, and Sirius Black is an innocent man,” Dumbledore said, and Hagrid sighed in relief. “How and why that is so, however, is rather a long story...”

“The only problem is, Hagrid talks too much when he gets even a little drink in him,” Remus said, pacing around the kitchen. “But what else were we going to do? Put a Memory Charm on him?”

“He’s resistant to them anyway,” Sirius put in, wincing as Aletha swabbed the long, shallow scrape along the back of his head. “It’s his giant blood, I think. Same thing that makes him hard to Stun.”

“Bad situation all around,” Aletha said, her lips pursed as she dabbed a Healing Potion onto Sirius’ cut. “I think we did just about the only thing we could.”

“This Malfoy character sounds like bad news, though,” Danger said, rocking Meghan gently.

“Oh, you have no idea,” Sirius said grimly. “He married my cousin Narcissa – it was a perfect match, they were both in love – with themselves. And both of them Dark as Snape’s hair. He’s got a son, just Harry and Neenie’s age. Draco. Honestly, no one in my family has any idea how to give a child a normal name...”

“Yes, I do remember the teasing you used to get in our first year,” Remus said. “That was the first thing Snape ever twitted you on, wasn’t it?”

“No, second. First was becoming a Gryffindor.” Sirius grinned. “When he added in my looks, I threw my pumpkin juice at him. First detention at Hogwarts, opening banquet. It’s a record, or so I’ve been told.”

“Not one any cub of ours will be trying to break,” Aletha said firmly, magically affixing a bandage to the back of Sirius’ head. “There, you’re patched up.”

“We’ll just have to be careful from now on,” Danger said. “Extra careful.”

Lucius Malfoy scowled at his fire. He knew Black was alive, and in England, and that he had the Potter boy, but the Ministry refused to believe anything they couldn’t see in front of their faces. It had worked for the Dark forces in the past – it was how Black had got arrested in the first place – but now it was working against him as well.

But wait. There was a woman with them. And a little girl. Black may not come out in public again looking like that, but the woman might. Or the girl.

Once I find either of them, it’s only a matter of time before I find Black and Potter...

And then I will triumph. Harry Potter will be mine, and raised properly, instead of defying the Dark Lord, he will serve him...

Revenge, Lucius thought, would be so sweet.

Elsewhere in the house, a woman walked by a room, humming as if to herself. She smiled sadly as she heard the crying in the room stop.

I can do so little for him, she reflected. I do not know how to love him... The little boy stared at the wall of his room. Quietly, he hummed the same tune he had just heard from the woman in the hallway, note-perfect even to her hesitations.

His entire being was filled with a longing for something he could not name. He only knew it was missing, and the song helped to fill a little bit of the emptiness inside him for a moment.

Aletha sat in a rocking chair in the children’s room, cradling Meghan in her arms and singing to her son and her daughters.

Downstairs, Remus played a winding melody that reminded her of flying, darting and swooping in the air, free as any bird, chasing and being chased and laughing for joy. Somehow, it meshed with her singing instead of clashing with it.

Dishes clinked in the kitchen. Danger laughed at something, probably some joke Sirius had cracked.

The song went on. Harry's eyes were already shut. Hermione's were closing fast. Meghan's breathing had long since settled into the regular pattern of sleep.

She brushed the children's hair out of their faces before she left.

All we can do is love them, and try to protect them, and hope for the best.

As Remus said, it will have to be enough.

It's all we have.

(A/N: Little bit of action in this chappie, hey? More to come!

Note to those who asked or wondered about the squeak Hermione heard: Yes, it was Harry. Not Wormtail, though that was a good thought... little Petie won't come into this story for a while.

Note to everyone who asked about Dudley: Yes, this is Harry's cousin Dudley, the one we know and hate – great phrase that, Mooncheese! The reason he just showed up in the book of magical children is because he just got magic, thanks to a certain Curse – good catch by Freja-the-goddess and tansy1354! (Similarly, if you were to check out the listing for August 17, 1981, there would be a Gertrude Granger listed, because that was the day her magic became active.) Dursley action from now on will be limited, but present (mostly in informational form – thanks for the idea, captuniv!) and Dudley will be shielded from the worst effects of the Curse.

Note about new information from JKR: Grr. I love the woman, she is my role model, but her habit of doling out information in this bit-by-bit way is annoying. So, this story was already AU – it's just a little more AU now, with Hermione a year younger than she is in canon. OK? (Check out the FAQs on the JKR official website if you don't know what I'm talking about.)

TTFN, ta-ta for now!)

Chapter 18: Crossing of the Paths

“Mummy, me up.”

“Not now, Ginny darling. FRED! GEORGE! GET BACK HERE!”

Ginny Weasley made a face and toddled over to her biggest brother. “Bill, me up,” she said, holding her arms out.

“Hey there, Gin-Gin. You want up? OK.” Bill hoisted Ginny into his arms. “You’re getting big,” he said, pretending to stagger under her weight. “Too big for me!” He put her back on the sidewalk.

Ginny pouted. “Cha’lie, me up!”

“Go ‘way, Ginny.” The ten-year-old held his little sister away from him with his foot and continued looking at the model broomsticks in the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies, ignoring her scream of rage.

Mrs. Weasley came bustling back along the sidewalk, dragging her five-year-olds behind her. “Oh, now where’s Ron got to?” she said distractedly. “And Percy?”

“He took Ron to the loo. Mum, why don’t you let me take everyone to the playground?” Bill suggested. “You can come get us when you’re done.”

“Thank you, Bill, you’re my angel...” Mrs. Weasley kissed her oldest son and thought with pride of his second year at Hogwarts, for which he would be leaving the very next day. As she watched, her seven-year-old son emerged from the nearby public toilet with his three-year-old brother in tow. They went to join their brothers and sister, and the whole cavalcade set off for the Diagon Alley playground.

No woman in all of England is as blessed as I am, Molly Weasley thought, smiling fondly. But blessings aren’t getting the shopping done.

She hurried off to the secondhand robe shop. There was still a lot to do.

At the playground, Bill pushed Ginny in the baby swing while Fred and George seesawed. Charlie and Percy started the carousel going, and Ron went to dig in the sandbox.

They had the place to themselves to begin with, but that didn't last long. A woman came around the corner with a baby in a sling and a little kid by each hand – probably about Ron's age, Bill thought, looking them over with an experienced older brother's eye. A boy and a girl, both with dark blond hair, and pretty cute, too. Might be twins, or just friends.

The newcomers ran over to the sandbox and got in as the woman sat down on a nearby bench. Bill listened with half an ear, ready to head off trouble if Ron started anything. He'd been argumentative lately...

"Hi," the other little boy said.

"Hi," said Ron.

"What you makin'?"

"Castle."

"C'we help?"

"Okay."

And that was it. Bill ran beneath Ginny to the accompaniment of her giggles and turned around to get a look. The three children were peacefully packing sand onto a large mound. Now and again Ron would direct one of the other two where to put a handful.

Bill gave the woman, now with a blanket over her shoulder, a small wave, and received one in return. Ducking under Ginny again, he failed to see Fred and George depart the seesaw with purposeful looks at one another.

Harry noticed the two same-looking boys trying to sneak up on them. "Who they?" he asked the red-haired boy, pointing at them.

The boy turned around. "My b'others," he said, looking a little scared. "They mean. I go on the swings."

"We go too," Hermione said, and the three of them hurried over to the swing set.

George looked at Fred. In their unspoken twin language, he said, Aw, nuts.

We'll get him another time, Fred answered.

The red-haired boy took the swing on the very end of the line. Hermione took the next one, and Harry took the one next to the baby swing, where a little girl was getting pushed by a much bigger boy.

"She you sister?" he asked the boy on the swing, over Hermione's head.

"Yeah. Ev'yone wif red hair is my fam'ly."

Wow, Harry thought. Everyone on the playground, except him and Neenie, had red hair. Big family. Lots of boys.

He shrugged. Families were all different. Nobody else had a Pack, anyway.

And it was silly to be thinking when there was a perfectly good swing he was just sitting on.

"They were good as gold," Aletha said later that day. "No trouble at all. I want to bless whoever got that playground put in."

"A Muggle-style playground in Diagon Alley?" Sirius asked. "That's new since I was a kid."

"It went in about five years ago," Remus recalled.

“As an educational tool for all of England’s magical children, that they may learn how their Muggle counterparts play,” Aletha said pompously, “and grow in understanding.”

Sirius looked at her oddly. “Please tell me you’re quoting something.”

“The dedication plaque. I read it over while I was there, and remembered it for the entertainment value. Did they have what I wanted at the Apothecary, Remus? I’m sorry I shoved it off on you, but I wanted to get the little ones outside before they destroyed the place.”

“Oh, trust me, I wanted them out as much as you did,” Remus said, “if only so we wouldn’t have to buy everything they broke. And yes, they did. I put the bag on your kitchen counter.”

“Thank you.”

“I could use a little help in here,” Danger called from the front room.

Don’t tell me. You have snakes on your legs.

Why, however did you guess?

Sarcasm doesn’t become you. We’ll be right in.

The longer you dawdle, the longer it is before I can start dinner.

Point taken.

“Come on, Sirius, we have to rescue a fair lady from dreadful serpents.”

“But I’m comfortable here.” Sirius was leaning over Aletha’s shoulder and watching Meghan nurse.

“Let me clarify – the fair lady is holding our dinner hostage.”

“Here I come.”

He needs a T-shirt that says "Will do anything for food".

Darn you, woman, don't make me laugh at my best friend.

Why not? He makes you laugh at him on a daily basis.

That's different. And don't ask me how.

Fine.

"And what have you two been up to today?" Sirius asked, coming out of the hallway into the front room and scooping Harry off Danger's foot.

"We played," Harry said, hugging his godfather.

"We played wif a boy," Hermione added as Remus picked her up.

"He had owange hair, anna lotta b'others," Harry finished.

"Orange hair and a lot of brothers?" Sirius repeated. "Hey, Letha," he called down the hall, "who'd the cubs play with at the playground?"

"Looked like Weasleys to me," Aletha called back. "Red hair and lots of them. Why?"

"Just wondering." Sirius ruffled Harry's hair, back to its natural black within the four walls of the Den. "What was the boy's name, Harry?"

"I dunno." Harry reached up and started messing with Sirius' hair. This had a more noticeable effect than Sirius' efforts, because Harry's hair always looked as if it had just been mussed up.

"Do the Weasleys have any daughters?" Danger asked suddenly.

Sirius frowned. "I'm not sure. They're known for only ever having boys, but I thought I heard about a girl Weasley a while back. Before...

everything started happening.” He still had trouble talking about the events of two years past.

Aletha came through the hall into the front room, Meghan still attached, and sat down. Harry scampered over to her and climbed up beside her. “No point in me staying in the kitchen, if everyone else is in here,” she said, putting her arm around Harry.

“Letha, was it just boys at the playground, or were there any girls? Danger’s wondering if the Weasleys have any daughters.”

“I think the youngest one was a girl... Yes, I remember now, the Daily Prophet did a write-up about her when she was born, because the Weasleys hadn’t had a girl in their family in so long. Her name’s something unusual, I can’t think of it right now. It’ll come back to me at two in the morning. Any particular reason, Danger?”

Danger shrugged. “Not really. Just wondering.”

For true? Remus asked her.

No. But nothing concrete yet, either.

Share anyway?

All right. Remember “Black to red and red to brown”, and the redheads we dreamed of at the wedding?

The ones who danced with Harry and Hermione, yes... ah. I think I see. If that means what it seems to, then this boy they played with today, and his sister...

Are our children’s future partners. Their mates, if you’ll pardon the term.

Well, I’ve never heard anything but good of the Weasleys. They’re poor, but nothing’s wrong with that. With seven children, almost anyone would be. So I doubt we need to have any anxieties on that score.

And that's assuming we're even interpreting right. Danger sighed. Also, I have a terrible feeling we're forgetting something important.

Remus shrugged. As Letha said, it'll come to you at two in the morning. The only thing you're forgetting right now is that you have a hungry Pack to feed.

Well, if that's going to be your attitude, you can bloody well fend for yourself!

Language, language...

Molly Weasley was in her element, giving orders left and right.

"Fred, George, set the table, and do it right or you get no dessert. Bill, go upstairs and finish packing. Charlie, make sure Errol has fresh water. Percy, clean out your rat's cage immediately, it's starting to smell. Ronald, give me that back!" She seized her youngest son's hand, which was wrapped around her wand. "You know perfectly well you're not to touch my wand. Go in the other room and play nicely with your sister. Shoo."

The children shooed.

"Scabbers' cage is not smelly," Percy said with annoyance as he climbed the stairs. "He's a very clean rat."

"Mum just wanted us out from underfoot," Charlie said. "She didn't mean it personally."

Percy pouted all the way to his room anyway.

As September turned into October, both Harry and Hermione started showing more interest in books. Danger took on the role of schoolteacher, sitting them down for fifteen or twenty minutes worth of lessons every day, teaching them their ABC's, or numbers, or shapes, or whatever struck their fancy.

Neenie, in particular, took to the alphabet like a bird to the air. By mid-November, she was sitting on Remus' lap and pointing out letters

in the books he read aloud at night. Harry started doing that near Christmas, at which time Remus declared his lap off-limits while he read.

“One of them doing that is quite enough,” he said. “Two is just a little much.”

So Hermione and Harry began playing “reading” together, sitting with a book on both their laps and pointing out the letters to each other. It helped that many of their Christmas presents were nice big books, with letters sized for pointing out.

Dear Professor Dumbledore, and Hagrid,

Happy Christmas to you both. Nothing much to report – it’s been a quiet few months since that scare in August. Meghan is rolling over well and will probably be crawling soon. The older two want you to know that they drew the enclosed pictures all by themselves, for Christmas presents for both of you...

“Sirius, I have something to tell you,” Aletha said one January morning in their bedroom.

“The last time you said that, you were pregnant.”

“No, nothing like that.” She laughed. “But related, I suppose.”

“What is it?” Sirius said absently, scooping Meghan off the mattress and smiling at her. “Who’s my little girl? Who’s her Daddy’s little girl?” He wiggled his finger at her, coming closer and closer to her face. “Who’s my sweet little – OUCH!”

“As I was saying,” Aletha said with a straight face, “I think Meghan’s teething.”

Around Remus’ birthday, Danger noticed that the children weren’t playing reading anymore. Not that they’d given up the game, heavens no. It was just that they were no longer pretending to read.

“But they’re only three!” Remus said in surprise.

“Three and a half,” Sirius corrected.

“Does it make a difference?”

“I was reading by four,” Danger said. “And with the two of them to encourage each other, and the fact that we read to them pretty much every day... I’m not all that surprised, really. They’re both bright, especially verbally – their vocabularies have always been above average.”

“So, they can read. That’s wonderful,” Aletha said from the door. “The budding geniuses got into my makeup. Have a look.”

Sirius got one look at Harry and collapsed in spasms of laughter. The little boy had tried to write his name on his face with lipstick.

Hermione had used the products more conventionally, if heavily – her whole face was covered in powder, her eyelids were an astonishing shade of blue, and her lips and cheeks bright red. Danger stared at her. “She looks like an old photo of our mother,” she said, her shoulders shaking. “From when she went to a costume party once.”

“What was she dressed as?” Remus asked.

Danger took a shaky breath, drew herself up, and said with dignity, “A Chinese whore.”

At which point, she, and the rest of the Pack, surrendered to laughter once again.

The traditions of the Pack grew stronger as time went by. Every full moon, they built their den in front of the fireplace in what was now called the den room, opposite Aletha’s music room. After Remus’ change, the Pack would gather in their den and talk, about the past month and the month coming, about hopes and fears and joys and concerns. Then they would sleep, secure in one another’s company.

Special nights, whether for good or bad reasons, were also spent denning – April 14, August 17, Halloween, and Christmas Eve were all den nights. And really, one could say that the older cubs denned every night, since when Harry had three nightmares in four nights

following Halloween, the Pack yielded to the inevitable and pushed the two single beds in their room together. "At least they won't catch cold, getting in and out of bed all the time," was Aletha's only comment. "And there's no one here to judge us."

Meghan, of course, slept in her parents' bed (which had charms on it so she couldn't roll out), as she would until she was old enough for a bed of her own – "but the way this is going, she'll probably just move in with Harry and Neenie," Sirius said. There was a crib in the room as well, just in case it was needed, but it was rarely used.

By Meghan, anyway. Hermione and Harry played in it all the time.

"Oh, Sirius," called Aletha's honey-sweet voice from her kitchen. "Will you come here, please?"

"That doesn't sound good," Remus said, looking up from his book.

"No, it doesn't. Excuse me, cubs." Sirius got up from the sofa, where he'd been reading to Harry and Neenie. "I'll be right back."

What is she mad about now?

"Would you care to explain why I have just been delivered a copy of the March 29 edition of Witch Weekly?" Aletha asked, waving the offending periodical at him.

"Oh, good, it's here!" Sirius snatched the magazine from her hand and flipped to the table of contents.

"You seem very enthusiastic about something," Aletha said, looking at him oddly.

Sirius found what he was looking for. "Read that," he said, handing her back the magazine.

"Hmm. 'The Tale of Samuel and Alison', by Valentina Jett." Aletha sat down and began reading. Sirius tried not to fidget, but it was hard.

I hope she likes it. I really hope she likes it. I really really hope...

It seemed like much longer than ten minutes before Aletha sighed and put the magazine aside. "That's a nice little story," she said. "Romantic, sweet, but still believable. I especially liked the characters – they were very realistic."

"You really liked it?"

"Yes, I really liked it. Why?"

Sirius grinned at her. "I wrote it."

"You?" Aletha stared at him, open-mouthed. "I knew you were writing, but I never thought... oh, Sirius, it's beautiful! And – wait – "

"I wrote it for you," Sirius said, wanting to spin in circles, he was so happy. "For you and about you."

" '...a lovelier lady, in face or in deeds, none could imagine,' " Aletha read from the story. "Is that me?"

"Who else would it be?"

The magazine fell to the floor, unheeded.
Fear no light; his haughty show

Shall by a flower be brought low.

The flower truly speaks, O star,

Though from your thoughts her words are far.

The truth and wolf, to play their part,

Hold in their hands keys to the heart

Which longs for that it does not feel,

And needs but time and care to heal.

“What?”

“Yes, I think you speak for all of us, love,” Aletha said, pushing the parchment across the table to Danger. “What?”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t be asking you,” Danger said, sighing.

“Wait, let me see that again.” Danger passed the parchment back to Sirius. He perused it. “This looks like direct address,” he said, tapping at a portion of the third line. “ ‘O star’. Anyone know any stars?”

Remus laughed. “Always miss the obvious, don’t you, Padfoot?”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Stupid. Of course, me.”

“Heard any flowers talking lately?” Aletha asked.

“Nope, ‘fraid not. But if I do, I’ll be sure to listen.”

“And ‘truth’ was you last time, Letha,” Remus said. “It’s not unreasonable to assume it’s you again. So you and I apparently have keys to someone’s heart in our hands.”

“Wonder whose.”

“What I wonder,” Danger said, “is if the flower is the same in both mentions. If she is, she’s quite some person – she’s going to bring down someone haughty, the ‘light’, I guess, and tell Sirius some kind of truth he’s not expecting.”

“There are many things I’m not expecting,” Sirius said. “Among them used to be that I had a Pack-sister with prophetic dreams. Or that I had a Pack-sister at all, for that matter.”

“Are you saying you don’t like me?” Danger folded her arms and scowled.

“No. I’m just saying, give me a little time to sort this out.”

“We will,” Remus said. “But I’m not sure how long the world will give us. Whatever this means, there was a definite urgent feel to it. It’s going to happen soon.”

“Soon as in tomorrow?” Aletha asked, glancing at the calendar, which had just been turned to May. “Or next week, or next month?”

Danger shrugged. “Not sure. Could be any of the above.”

“Or none of them,” Sirius countered. “All we know is, it’s coming.”

“There is one other thing,” Remus said. “The first phrase. Fear no light. If we’re being told not to be afraid, that means some kind of situation where we would normally be afraid.”

“And that is not good.” Aletha took a deep breath and shook her head. “Oh well. No use worrying about it until it happens. Pass the jam, please.”

June passed with nothing worse than a close call, when Paul Abbott, Aletha’s immediate superior, firecalled her at a moment when Sirius was chasing Harry, Hermione, and Meghan through the music room. Fortunately, Sirius was able to get himself out of the room in time by diving through the hidden archway as the flames turned green, and Aletha explained, when she came in response to the call, that the neighbors’ children were visiting her.

“We need to put an alarm on that fire,” Remus said afterwards, when everyone was recovering. “That was much too close.”

He did so the next day, with the result that Aletha’s fireplace howled like a dog every time a Floo connection was made into it. Sirius was not amused. The rest of the Pack found it hilarious.

If I ever find out what imbecile came up with the idea of “Bring Your Children to Work Day”, I will personally see to his torture myself.

Lucius Malfoy was not enjoying his day at the Ministry.

Cornelius Fudge, thank heaven, had no children, but most of the Ministry employees had families, with the result that the Ministry currently resembled an insane asylum.

I rather wish I had brought Draco, after all. Even if he is only four – no, not quite four, his birthday is tomorrow, I believe – he could teach these... animals quite a lot about proper behavior. He neatly sidestepped a rolling, screeching pair of redheads. Weasleys, of course. Incredible, that a pure-blood family can bring itself so low.

“Level four,” he said, stepping into the lift. I need to check on that dragon-breeder I heard about. If he is genuine, I could use his services...

The door of the lift opened. “Level four,” the female voice announced. “Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures...”

Lucius walked into the corridor, ignoring the voice.

“You’re it, you’re it!” squealed a child.

Here too. Merlin, how I hate children.

He looked in the direction of the voice and began to smile.

But, on second thought, perhaps they are not all bad...
Harry shot into Aletha’s office and dived under her desk.

“What is wrong with you?” Aletha asked in amazement.

“Scary man,” Harry said, panting.

Hermione ran in after him. Both children were brown-haired today. “Jamie’s no fun,” she announced, sticking out her tongue at the desk. “He ran away and he won’t play with me.”

“I’m sure he’ll play with you, Janie. Come on, Greeneyes. No need to be scared. No scary men here, see?”

Harry poked his head out. "Yeah," he agreed. "No more scary man."
Down the hall, Lucius could hardly restrain his glee.

July 25, 1984. Quite possibly, the best day of my life.

Then he reconsidered. No, July 26 will be better. For it will be the 26th when I become a national hero, beyond reproach, and adoptive father to Harry Potter...

(A/N: Houston, we have a problem...

Hee hee hee, cliffie time. Next chapter, "Light and Darkness", coming soon!)

Chapter 19: Light and Darkness

Danger awoke in darkness.

Her head ached. She was lying on a cold stone floor, and somewhere nearby she could hear dripping water. Remus' touch in her mind had the leaden feel of unconsciousness, rather than the relaxation of true sleep.

Something is very wrong here.

She backtracked in her mind. Where was I last?

In the front room. Vacuuming. I had just turned the machine off when Harry screamed, and I turned around –

And then nothing.

I don't like this.

There were footsteps somewhere nearby. Then the sound of a bolt being drawn, and a door being opened. Danger made herself go limp, as if she were still unconscious.

Light struck her closed eyelids. She had to force herself not to wince. Very, very carefully, she opened one eye just a sliver.

I don't like this at all.

The man in the doorway smiled smugly. Danger closed her eyes again rather than look at that expression, and slid back into her mind, to the stored memories of her beloved, which lay dormant within her own. Carefully, she touched the surface of those memories, seeking the face she had just seen, or a younger version of it. Cold, aristocratic, handsome if one didn't see the cruelty...

The name she was looking for floated into her consciousness as she heard the door close, and she sighed.

That's what I was afraid of.

She heard a gasp from somewhere nearby. "Who's there?" she asked, turning her head toward the sound automatically, though she couldn't see a thing.

"Sirius," his voice answered, a little slurred as if he was just waking up. "Danger?"

"Yes. Remus is here too, but he's still out. Is Aletha with you?"

"I don't know... hold on." There was a moment of odd scuffling noises, then, "Yes, she's here. Where's here?"

"I don't know where, but I know who."

"What?"

No, What's on second, Who's on first, Danger's memory supplied. She ignored it. "I know who did this. It's Lucius Malfoy. He was in here a minute ago."

Sirius commented at length on Lucius Malfoy's appearance, parentage, and personal habits. "This must be his manor," he said finally, imbuing the word with disgust. "He must have Harry here somewhere. Probably in with his own boy. And Hermione – oh, Merlin, Danger, he doesn't even think Muggleborns are people! He could have killed her by now! And Meghan – "

"Is probably fine," Danger interrupted firmly, trying to hold her own fear under control. Hermione, sweet little sister, Harry, my darling, Meghan, little cublet, oh please let them be all right... "Sirius, please calm down. We can't do anything if we panic."

"We can't do anything anyway," Sirius said, his voice rising in pitch. "We're trapped, we can't get out – "

Aletha moaned.

“Take care of her,” Danger said, surprised at the authority in her voice. “She needs you.”

She turned away from them as Sirius began to call Aletha’s name, his voice returning to its usual baritone pitch. There’s nothing like taking care of someone else to keep your mind off fear.

She felt her way along the floor until she found Remus. He was lying crumpled on his side, as if he had been Stunned and left where he fell. Carefully, Danger rolled him onto his back, then insinuated her mind into his and called to him.

Remus? Time to wake up, love. Come on, we need all of us together on this one. Please wake up.

She considered for a moment, then decided to admit, if only to her love, what she was trying so hard to conceal from Sirius.

I’m afraid. I need you. Please, help me.

There was a moment of mental silence. She could hear Sirius telling Aletha what little they knew. Then...

You... know me... too well... sweetest...

The thoughts swam up from the depths of his mind, growing clearer by the moment.

I can’t not come... if someone needs me.

Danger breathed a little easier, and pressed Remus’ hand. And I do, oh, I do. We’re really in it deep this time.

Do tell. Where are we, and why is this floor so cold?

The explanation took only a few moments, mind-to-mind.

We have to take care of Sirius first, Remus said when he was up to speed. This is going to be hardest on him. Memories of Azkaban.

Agreed.

“Remus, Danger?” Aletha’s voice said.

“Here we are,” Danger answered.

“Stay there, we’ll come to you,” Sirius said, and the scuffling Danger had heard earlier resumed. A moment later, she yelped as something cold and wet made contact with her hand.

“What’s wrong, never felt a dog’s nose before?” Aletha asked from nearby, laughing a little as she sat down, next to Remus, Danger thought.

“Ew!” Danger wiped her hand on her pants. But it made sense. Sirius in dog-form would be – had been – able to smell them out and guide Aletha to them.

“I don’t like this place,” Sirius said quietly from beside her. They were gathered in a rough circle now, as far as Danger could tell. “It smells like pain. Pain, and fear, and someone enjoying it.”

“Sounds like a proper Malfoy attitude to me,” said Remus. “But we’re not going to play along. He gets nothing out of us that we don’t give him. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” the Pack answered together, and Danger felt a little better.

I’m not alone. None of us are alone. We have each other still.

Thank God he didn’t figure that out. If he’d locked us up separately, we’d be broken by the end of the first day.

Day. When is this? How long were we out?

She voiced the question aloud.

“No way to tell,” Aletha said. “It was Wednesday the 25th, the last I remember. It was about, oh, 5:30. I was in the music room, with Meghan and Neenie, and then I was here.”

“I was upstairs,” Sirius said. “I heard Harry scream, and something hit me just before I got to the stairs.”

“Harry was with me, in our front room,” Danger said. “Remus?”

“I was in Aletha’s front room, picking up, but I didn’t hear any scream. So whatever got us – Malfoy, most likely – probably started in Aletha’s place, moved forward through it, then came over to our half. Wait, Sirius, what half of the upstairs were you in?”

“I was on Letha’s side, but I used your stairs. Or I would have. I was on the balcony when he got me. He must have been Disillusioned. That sneaking, stinking, misbegotten...”

“Ssh!” Danger wasn’t sure who had made the sound, but as Sirius fell silent they all heard what had prompted it. Footsteps.

Probably here to gloat.

“Shield your eyes,” Sirius warned. “The light’ll blind you, otherwise.”

Light. Fear no light. Fear no...

Light.

Lucius means light! Her voice and Remus’ combined in her mind as they both came to the conclusion at the same moment.

“Don’t be afraid of him,” Danger hissed quickly as the bolt was drawn. “The dream, it was him. Fear no light. Don’t act afraid.”

“No, do act afraid, make him think he has the edge,” Aletha answered urgently, and the door opened. Danger buried her face in Remus’ shoulder and whimpered.

Not very convincing, Remus remarked.

He doesn't know me. It might be, to him.

True.

"How touching," drawled Malfoy's voice. Danger looked through Remus' eyes as they adjusted to the light and saw the man framed in the doorway, leaning genteelly on some kind of walking stick. "All the little Mudbloods and Muggle-lovers together. Black, how nice to see you again."

"What have you done with Harry?" Sirius demanded. "And the girls, where are they?"

"Oh, don't worry, your children are safe," Malfoy said negligently, examining the collar of his cloak. "My house-elf is good with babies, and the other two are quite happy with my Draco, I can assure you. I'm certain he'll have plenty of good advice for them about living in this household."

"Living here?" Aletha said, shading her eyes with her hand. "You must be joking."

"No, I'm quite serious." Pale eyes gleamed with dark humor. "No pun intended, Black. After all, they'll need a new home once your happy little household is broken up."

"We have no intention of breaking up our home," Remus said levelly.

"I'm sure you don't. I, however..." Malfoy smirked. "Let's say, I have other plans for you. For instance, Ms. Freeman – or is it Mrs. Black now? You and your beautiful daughter. Were you aware of the number of fascinating magics that require the participation of a mother and child? Of course, I'll have to choose which one to investigate, since they can only be performed once..."

Remus, and Danger through him, saw Aletha's face contort, but she disdained to reply.

“And you, Lupin. I once had the pleasure of hosting your former friend Pettigrew here for a night or two, on business of the Dark Lord’s, you understand. Naturally I offered him wine after dinner, and he accepted. I learned all sorts of fascinating things that night. Such as how he and his friends had become Animagi. And why.”

Peter always was a babbling drunk. So the bastard knows about me, does he?

“I think I might enjoy having a pet werewolf,” Malfoy finished. “Under Imperius, of course. It’s not illegal on non-humans, after all.”

Remus’ mind flashed red-hot with anger in an instant.

DON’T! Danger shouted mentally. He’s not worth it.

“And you actually got a woman into your bed despite it? I am impressed,” Malfoy said, leaning forward to get a closer look at Danger. “She favors the girl. From the back, that is. But the girl can’t be yours, that much I know...”

“The child is my wife’s sister,” Remus said stiffly. “And my ward. What do you plan to do with her?”

Malfoy shrugged carelessly. “Raise her, perhaps, as a servant girl. Or throw her out and see if she survives. One Mudblood more or less, what does it matter?”

Remus ground his teeth.

I wasn’t sure anyone actually did that, Danger’s mind noted incongruously.

“No, I have a better idea.” Malfoy smiled. “Your ward, you say. So she trusts you, loves you even. How amusing, then, to place you in the same room during the full moon...”

Danger whipped around with a snarl, which changed into a cry of pain as her unadjusted eyes met the light.

“Ah, spirited,” Malfoy said, curling his lip. “A Muggle, this one, isn’t she? Properly Obliviated, she might do for a pot-scrubber. Dobby will have enough to do, with an extra child to tend.”

“Harry,” Aletha said with quite a bit of snarl in her own voice. “So him you plan to keep.”

“Would I be so heartless as to kill The Boy Who Lived?” Malfoy asked with feigned astonishment. “I want only the best for Harry Potter. Therefore, I will care for him myself. He has great power. I want to be sure he is taught to use it correctly.”

“The only problem being,” said Sirius in deadly quiet tones, “that our ideas and yours about the correct use of power don’t match up at all.”

“And you see where your ideas have got you,” Malfoy said, waving his hand at their surroundings. “I suggest you enjoy it while you can, Black. Azkaban won’t be nearly so comfortable. They’ll watch you all the more closely when they know your little trick. Four legs and fur won’t save you again.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Danger could see Aletha’s hand firmly pressed against Sirius’ hip, holding him where he was. Otherwise, she was sure, he would have launched himself at Malfoy long ago. And probably got hurt. Malfoy’s got a wand on him, I’d bet my life on it.

“Harry Malfoy...” Lucius said with a smile. “I rather like the sound of that, don’t you? Harry Malfoy, faithful servant of the Dark Lord...”

Sirius informed Malfoy where he could take his ideas, and what he could do with them when he got there. It was probably anatomically impossible, but certainly interesting to imagine, Danger thought.

“Temper, temper, Black,” Malfoy said, stepping into the hall. “Sleep well, all. Tomorrow, your new lives begin.”

Before the door quite closed, Danger got a look at her watch.

10:30. And it's still the 25th. We haven't been here more than a few hours. Good.

Now that Malfoy was gone, she could hear Sirius shuddering, his breath catching in his throat. Danger pressed herself against his side, offering him what comfort she could, hearing Remus moving to his back and Aletha embracing him from the other side. "It's all right," Aletha was whispering to him. "It's all right. It won't happen. You know it won't. Dumbledore knows the truth now. He won't let it happen again."

"Fear no light; his haughty show/ Will by a flower be brought low," Danger recited quietly. "That was a haughty show if I ever saw one. He's going down, Sirius. My dreams don't lie."

"No, but they usually need major interpretation," Remus said dryly, sitting with his back against Sirius'. "We're here, Sirius. You're going to be all right."

"There's something I need to tell you," Sirius said through his shivers. "Something about Harry. Remus, Letha, you never knew why James and Lily went into hiding in the first place, did you?"

"They went into hiding because Voldemort was after them," Aletha said. "Did they need another reason?"

"Frank and Alice Longbottom went into hiding at the same time," Remus recalled. "Does that have something to do with it?"

"Yes. To both of you." Sirius was more in control of himself now, his voice firmer and clearer. "It was a prophecy. A boy born at the end of July, to parents who had defied Voldemort three times, who would have the power to defeat him. And Lord-Ugly-Face found out about it."

“End of July... that’s right, Neville was born July 30,” Aletha remembered. “Was there anything else? Anything that might make it clear which one of them it is?”

“I don’t remember. Something about a mark, and power the Dark Lord knows not... but the worst was at the end.” Sirius paused, as if he hated what he was about to say. “ ‘Either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives.’ ”

Either must die at the hand of...

No. Oh, no.

“That... would make Harry the only person who can kill Voldemort,” Remus said slowly. “And if he grows up under the impression that he should be serving him...”

“We’re all doomed,” Aletha finished grimly. “Danger, I sure hope you’re right. Because if you’re not...”

“Everyone is going to die,” Danger whispered, staring into the darkness, seeing green eyes filled with hatred and a lust for killing and pain...

Harry Potter bolted awake, gasping.

Scary thing!

He looked wildly around. The scary thing wasn’t there, but neither was he anywhere he recognized. He was sitting on a big bed in a big, dark room, with Neenie next to him, still asleep.

There was another little boy in front of the fireplace, lying on his stomach and watching the fire.

“Hi,” Harry said.

The other boy scrambled to his feet. “My name is Draco Malfoy,” he announced, hands on his hips, “and this is my house. Who’re you?”

Out-of-den, Harry remembered. My out-of-den name. "Jamie," he said. "Jamie White. This's my sister Jane. Why're we here?"

"My father bringed you here. He said you live with us now."

"No!" Harry slid off the bed and faced Draco. "We do not! We live at the Den!"

"Animals live in dens," Draco said with a curl to his lip, "and you better not say no to my father. He hit you if you do."

Harry blinked. "Your father hits?"

"Yeah. Don't yours?"

"I don't got a father," Harry said. "He died."

"You have a mother?"

Harry shook his head.

Draco frowned. "Who takes care'a you? The house-elf?"

"What's a house-elf?"

"I show you," Draco said, and shouted, "Dobby!"

There was a crack, and a creature about their size, with big ears, huge green eyes, and long fingers, materialized in the corner of the room, like Moony or Letha Apparating. "Yes, little master?" the thing said.

"Dobby, this is Jamie," Draco said grandly. "He lives here now. Jamie, this's Dobby. He the house-elf, so we can boss him. He has to do what we say."

"Hello, little master Jamie," Dobby said, bowing to Harry.

“Hello,” Harry said, giving a little bow back.

“Go ‘way, Dobby,” Draco ordered. “I gonna talk to Jamie more.”

“Yes, sir.” Dobby disappeared with another loud crack.

“We don’t got a house-elf at the Den,” Harry said, remembering what they had been talking about. “We got Padfoot and Moony and Danger and Letha. They takes care of us.”

“They don’t hit?”

“No. Sometimes they yell when we be bad, and sometimes we gotta go to naughty seat. But they don’t hit.”

Draco looked confused.

“Why your father hit you?” Harry asked.

“When I be bad,” Draco said. “When I cry at night.”

“Why you cry?”

Draco looked at the floor. “Scary dreams,” he admitted.

“I get scary dreams,” Harry said. “So I cuddle up with Neenie, and they go away.”

“Who’s Neenie?”

“Her,” Harry said, pointing at Hermione.

“You said her name was Jane.”

“Neenie her nickname. Like Greeneyes for me. You got a nickname?”

Draco shook his head. “Dobby calls me little master,” he said.

“What your father call you?”

“Brat,” Draco said. “Boy.”

“Your mother?”

“I don’t see her any.”

“You got any brothers or sisters?”

Draco shook his head. “My father said you be my brother now,” he said, looking at Harry sideways.

Harry shrugged. “OK. I be your brother, if you like. Neenie c’n be your sister too.”

Neenie made the little sound she always made in the morning, a cross between a sigh and a moan. “She wakes up!” Harry said, and climbed on the bed. “Neenie, lookit, we got a new brother!”

Neenie sat up and rubbed her eyes. “Hi,” she said to Draco. “What’s your name?”

“Draco. What yours?”

“I told you, her name Jane,” Harry said in annoyance. “Come on, Neenie, let’s play!”

“What we gonna play?” Neenie asked, sliding off the bed after Harry.

“You wanna play catch?” Harry asked Draco.

“What’s catch?”

Harry and Neenie exchanged looks. “You don’t know catch?” Neenie said incredulously. “We’ll show you. You got a ball?”

“No.”

“That OK,” Neenie said, and pulled off her socks. “We make a sockball!”

“Yeah, sockball!” Harry pulled off his own socks, and Neenie knotted them all around each other. They often played sockball on laundry days with Moony and Padfoot, until Letha and Danger caught them and took the socks away.

“You watch,” Neenie said authoritatively to Draco. “We play catch.”

She hurled the ball to Harry, who caught it and threw it back. “See?” Neenie said. “Now you play.” She tossed the ball at Draco, who caught it reflexively.

“You good!” Harry said, clapping his hands. “Throw it here!”

Draco’s aim wasn’t very good, since he’d never played before, but he got better pretty quickly. Soon the sockball was flying in all directions. It almost fell into the fire once, but bounced off a shield-looking thing that popped up in front of it. “Safety Charm,” Draco said nonchalantly, and retrieved the ball. “Catch, Neenie!”

“I’m hungry,” Harry said after a few more minutes of the game.

“Me, too,” Neenie said. “We gonna get dinner?”

“Dobby!” Draco called again, and the house-elf appeared. “Jamie and Neenie hungry,” he said. “They didn’t get dinner. Get them dinner.”

“Yes, sir.” Dobby bowed and disappeared.

“You rude,” Neenie said disapprovingly.

“Am not. He’s just a house-elf.”

“Letha says be polite to everyone,” Neenie recited.

“My father says boss the house-elf hard,” Draco retorted.

“Your father stupid!” Neenie shouted.

“He is not!”

“He mean!” Harry yelled. “He stole us from our Pack, an’ he hits you!” Then he looked again at Draco. Pale-blond hair, long thin face... “You look like your father?” he asked.

Draco nodded.

“Your father the scary man! He tried t’hurt Padfoot and me!”

Neenie whimpered. “I want Danger!”

Draco looked from one of them to the other, totally bewildered.

Dobby chose this moment to reappear with a tray. “Dinner for little master and mistress,” he said, snapping his fingers and turning on a light in a corner of the room where a table and chairs sat.

He was hungrier than he was mad, Harry decided, and went to see what was for dinner.

A peanut butter sandwich lay on each plate, with crisps and apple slices beside it. There were also three glasses of milk and a plate of cookies. “A snack for you, Master Draco,” Dobby said, twisting a corner of the pillowcase he was wearing in his hands. “It is very late, you should be in bed. Eat your snack and Dobby will read you a story.”

“No,” Draco said, getting into one of the chairs. “I’m staying up with Jamie and Neenie. They don’t have to go to bed.”

“Yes, they do,” Dobby said, looking frightened. “Master Lucius is coming, and little masters and mistress should be in bed when he comes. He will not hit you if you are in bed.”

Draco looked a little scared. “OK,” he said quickly. “I go to bed, then. But I want my cookies first.”

“Of course, sir. Dobby will be back in a little while.” He disappeared.

“Where does he go?” Harry asked, taking a bite of his sandwich.

Draco shrugged. “Dunno. Somewheres else, I guess.” He bit a cookie in half.

They devoted themselves to eating for a while. When Neenie reached for a cookie, Draco pulled the plate out of her reach. “Mine!” he said.

“You had lots,” Neenie said, making a mad face. “Gimme some.”

“No!” Draco held the plate away from Neenie.

It was well within reach of Harry, though, and he grabbed two handfuls of cookies off it.

“Hey, gimme those back!” Draco yelled.

“You don’t share too good,” Harry said, going the other way around the table to put one handful on Neenie’s plate. “They for everyone, not just you.”

Draco pouted. “Are not,” he said without any real conviction.

Harry took a defiant bite out of one. “Are too,” he said.

“Fine, you can have some,” Draco said sulkily.

Dobby popped out of thin air and started gathering up the dishes. “Thank you,” Neenie said to him.

“Thank you,” Harry echoed.

Dobby looked startled.

“You wanna play with us?” Neenie asked.

“Hey, yeah!” Harry said. “You can be the monkey in the middle!”

“Monkey in the middle?” Draco and Dobby asked together.

“We show you!” Neenie said, grabbing the sockball.

After a few moments of explanation, they took their places. The children flung the ball with a will, but Dobby’s heart didn’t seem to be in the game. “You gotta try!” Harry called after the third easy throw passed over the elf’s head. “Really try!”

“You gotta try, Dobby, that’s a order!” Draco said, giggling, as he caught the ball.

“Yes, sir,” Dobby said, looking a little worried.

Lucius Malfoy walked into his son’s room just in time to see his house-elf catch a ball thrown by his son.

A ball made of knotted-up socks.

“I’ll take that,” he said quickly, snatching it out of the elf’s hand, hoping the wretched creature hadn’t noticed what it was. “The baby is crying, Dobby. Go tend her.”

“Yes, sir,” the elf said, and disappeared.

Good, he didn’t see.

“And as for you,” Lucius said, turning to his son. “Do you know what you just did?”

The boy shook his head dumbly.

“You’ve lost us our servant,” Lucius said softly. “Do you know what happens to little boys who do that?”

Draco took a step backwards.

“Don’t you run away from me,” Lucius hissed, grabbing the boy by the arm. “You have done wrong. And you must be punished.”

Draco whimpered a little, looking terrified.

Excellent. The Potter boy should have no trouble learning proper fear, with this example in front of him.

“Don’t move,” Lucius instructed his son, pulling his wand from the top of his walking stick. The spell that made a thin, flexible rod this time, he thought, rather than the thicker, firmer one he often favored.

He was about to speak the spell when something crashed into his legs from the side, throwing him off balance. He reeled sideways – a second force struck him – his head hit the mantelpiece –

Everything went dark.

Harry picked himself up off the floor and looked at Lucius’ unconscious form. He and Neenie had been told they should never run into people’s legs as hard as they could. Now he saw why.

“Is he – dead?” Neenie asked, standing up.

“No. He just asleep. See, he breathing.” Harry picked up Lucius’ wand. “Come on, we go find the Pack. Draco, you come too?”

“You hurt my father,” Draco said, staring at the man. “How come?”

“He was gonna hurt you,” Harry said, stating the obvious. “Come on.”

Still staring, Draco followed them out the door, which Harry closed behind them.

“Lock it,” Neenie said. “Then he can’t follow us.”

“How?”

“You got a wand, silly. Do magic!”

“I don’t know how!” Harry objected.

“I think you just say, ‘Lock up,’” Neenie said, holding out her hand to demonstrate.

“Lock up,” Harry said, pointing the wand at the door. Nothing happened.

He gazed at the door as if it had the answer. There was a snake painted on it. No, two snakes. They were all twisted around each other... they almost looked like they were alive...

“Lock up,” Harry said.

He jumped as the door locked with an audible click. “It worked!”

Neenie and Draco were staring at him. “You – hissed,” Neenie said, awe in her voice. “You hissed like a snake and did magic!”

“You spoke Parseltongue,” said a voice from behind them. “It is a rare gift.”

Danger awoke from a fitful sleep with a certainty in her mind.

“Get up,” she said. “Everyone up.”

“Huh?” said Aletha intelligently.

“Everyone get up. We have to get ready.”

“Ready for what?” Sirius asked, sounding confused.

“Ready to go. Come on.”

Where are we going?

Home. I think. If everything works out right.

“Up you come, Padfoot,” Remus said. She heard him pulling Sirius to his feet.

Aletha shushed them. “Someone’s coming – ”

The bolt was drawn back and the door opened. They shielded their eyes, blinking, in the sudden light.

Sirius was first to recover, and stared at the figure revealed in the doorway.

“What are you doing here?” he said.

(A/N: No prizes for guessing who it is, you obviously already know from your reviews!

Next chapter, “Justice and Revenge”, coming soon!)

Chapter 20: Justice and Revenge

The bolt was drawn back and the door opened. They shielded their eyes, blinking, in the sudden light.

Sirius was first to recover, and stared at the figure revealed in the doorway.

“What are you doing here?” he said.

“I live here,” said a cool, feminine voice. Its owner, slim and blonde, held a lighted wand in her hand. “Follow me.”

The Pack traded looks. Remus made a small motion with his hand, and Sirius nodded, then led the way out of their dungeon.

Who... Danger began.

Narcissa Malfoy. Lucius’ wife. Sirius’ cousin.

Narcissa... feminine of Narcissus... which is not only a name...

But a flower. Indeed.

“I must commend your parenting skills, Sirius,” Narcissa said as she led the way down the stone corridor. “The boy seems fearless, the girl nearly so. Where did you find her?”

“She belongs to Remus’ wife,” Sirius answered, forestalling Danger with a lifted hand.

Danger gave a mental snort. Well, if he’s going to be rude about it –

He’s not being rude, he’s being prudent. These are treacherous waters, my love. Negotiations between pureblood wizards are known for being circuitous and filled with traps. Sirius grew up in this environment, he knows all the tricks – and he knows Narcissa. We don’t.

Point taken.

“Sirius,” Remus said softly. Sirius looked over his shoulder without breaking stride. “You speak for us.” He indicated himself and Danger.

“And for me,” Aletha added in a similar tone.

“Voice of the Pack, eh?” Sirius gave a half-smile. “I’ll do my best.”

They climbed a set of stairs and passed through an iron-bound wooden door, entering the main part of the manor house. It was vast and luxurious, decorated mostly in green and black, with serpents the main motif. Danger squared her shoulders and held her head high.

Make believe you’re brave, and the trick will take you far, she chanted in her mind. You may be as brave as you make believe you are.

Isn’t that a song?

Yes, but I can never remember the tune.

Remus seemed about to answer, but instead he stopped suddenly, turning his head to one side. I hear something.

What?

It’s... the children.

“The children!”

“Yes, your children are safe. I will bring you where they are,” Narcissa said distantly, ignoring Aletha’s sharp intake of breath. “And then we will speak.”

“We will speak,” Sirius responded, as if it were a ritual. Which it might well be, for all Danger knew.

Narcissa quickened her steps, seeming to respond to the Pack’s impatience, and turned swiftly into a room which had light spilling

from it. Sirius and Aletha followed her in, Remus and Danger on their heels.

Harry and Hermione were sitting side by side on a leather couch, with a little boy who strongly favored Lucius Malfoy on Hermione's other side and a book on her lap. They all looked up as the Pack entered, and the book went flying as Harry and Neenie flung themselves into their Pack-parents' open arms. Aletha wrenched herself out of the general melee after a moment to hurry to a corner where a cradle sat, with a strange-looking creature standing by it.

House-elf, Danger identified from Remus' memories as she hugged Harry close. Considered a lesser creature, source of unpaid labor, usually bound to old or rich wizarding families. The Malfoys being both of the above.

The boy must be Malfoy's son. Drake? No, Draco. She gathered Neenie to herself, relinquishing Harry to Remus, and looked over her sister's head at the boy. He was sitting on the couch, hugging his knees to his chest, watching the Pack's reunion with a strange expression on his face.

I wonder what it is he wants so badly. The only thing that inspires that look on Harry or Neenie is cupcakes that aren't cool enough to eat yet.

Sirius was holding Meghan now, with only one arm, because the other was around Aletha's waist. Remus was loosening Harry's arms around his neck, explaining patiently that people needed air to live. Danger felt Neenie shiver in her arms. "It's all right, sweetheart," she breathed, stroking the little girl's hair. "It's all right now. We're all together again. I love you."

"Love you," Neenie murmured, pressing herself closer as she did when she wanted to be picked up. Danger obliged, standing up with the girl in her arms as Remus did the same with Harry. Draco quickly vacated the couch, moving to a chair in the corner of the room.

Looks like an invitation to me. Danger sat down in the middle of the couch and rotated Hermione onto her lap. As she had expected,

Neenie's thumb was already in her mouth. Harry's head rested on Remus' shoulder as they joined the sisters. Aletha seated herself on Danger's other side, Meghan in her arms.

Sirius sat down in the chair next to the couch, twin to Narcissa's own, which faced them all from across the room. "We are ready," he said formally.

"As am I." Narcissa looked only at Sirius, as if the rest of the Pack didn't exist.

Maybe, to her, we don't. We're not purebloods, after all.

"Sirius Black, my cousin, I greet you," Narcissa said.

"Narcissa Black Malfoy, my cousin, I greet you," Sirius answered. "You wish to speak with me."

"I do."

"Name the matter of speech."

"Business. Namely, a transaction between us, to our mutual benefit."

"I am willing to listen. Speak, if you will."

Narcissa hesitated. "I must speak of another matter first," she said. "A personal matter. An... outstanding wager between us, one might say."

"I was unaware any such existed."

"It was no formal affair, no money or goods were at stake. It was merely a difference of opinion we once spoke about, you and I."

Sirius let his hand dangle over the arm of the chair and made a fist, thumb inside, then transferred it out.

In Marauder sign-language, that means “What the hell is this person talking about?” Remus noted. We used to use that one a lot in class.

“Go on,” Sirius said aloud.

“Once, when we were at school together, I stated my opinion that love was a fiction and a folly, and that no truly strong or pure wizard would allow himself to be tainted by it. You took exception to this, and we would have dueled, had we not been restrained by others.”

I was one of those others. It took four people to keep them apart.

“I wish...” Narcissa hesitated. “I wish to apologize. I was wrong.”

Sirius stared at her for one second, then recovered his aplomb. “Apology accepted,” he said coolly, while opening his hand fully, then touching thumb and little finger together.

“This is one for the record books.” I agree. Getting a Black to apologize for something, or admit to being wrong, is like getting crups and kneazles to be friends. Getting both is nothing short of a miracle. And about a subject like this...

Not what you were expecting?

No, to put it bluntly. Nor what Sirius is, I’m sure.

“I would ask, though,” Sirius continued, “what brought about your change of heart.”

Narcissa gestured to the corner of the room. Everyone turned to look.

Ah-ha. Of course.

“I never expected a child to change me,” Narcissa said almost absently, looking at Draco, who shrank into himself slightly with all the attention. “My mother told me about the process, of course. She warned me about both the pain and the emotion that came with childbirth. I was prepared for the pain. For the emotion, I was not.”

Sirius' hand contorted oddly. It looked as if he were crossing all his fingers at once.

I'm not translating that one directly, but he thinks she's lying.

No. She's not. Danger's thoughts came in a rush. "The flower truly speaks, O star/ Though from your thoughts her words are far." That's what this is. She's telling the truth. Remind him.

Remus cleared his throat. Sirius looked back at him, and he made the crossing-fingers gesture, then uncrossed them, extending all his fingers at once, and tapped Danger's knee. Sirius looked at them for a moment, then nodded once and turned back to Narcissa.

"I was unprepared, as I say, for the... feeling which came to me on the birth of my son," Narcissa went on. "I would have given my life for him. I would have done anything for him. And gradually I began to realize that others felt this way as well... and that the feeling had a name, and that name was love."

She gave a short, humorless laugh. "I tried to deny it, then to fight it, but it was too late. I loved my son, and nothing in the world or beyond it could change that. Soon after I discovered this, the Dark Lord fell." She looked at Harry, half-dozing on Remus' shoulder. "I lied, as all of our fraternity lied, lied to save myself."

"Your fraternity," said Sirius, his tone lingering between statement and question.

"The Death Eaters," Narcissa stated bluntly, and pulled up her left sleeve. Danger gasped and Aletha hissed under her breath at the sight of a faint marking on the pale skin – a skull with a serpent issuing from its mouth.

"Yes, I bear the Mark," Narcissa said evenly. "I took it willingly, gladly even. Before Draco was born. And I lied about that to the fools at the Ministry. Those who did not lie, went to Azkaban for it. Perhaps they will have their reward when the Dark Lord returns. For his own

sake, Lucius was not willing to take that chance. For my child's sake, neither was I."

"You did not dare leave him alone with his father," Sirius said, again letting his sentence trail away so that it was unclear whether he was asking for information or stating a fact.

Narcissa laughed again. "He has been alone with his father all his life," she said mirthlessly, toying with a scrap of parchment. "I dare not spend time with him. It is not the correct or expected thing for a woman in my position to care for her son. The house-elf can show him more affection than I." Shreds of parchment fluttered to the floor. "All that I can do is watch, and listen, and distract my husband before he can strike the boy more than once or twice..."

Narcissa's face, which had been soft for a moment, hardened again. "Lucius is a fool. He guards against scrying-spells from outside the house, but not from inside. So I see everything that happens to my son. I saw what transpired between your children and mine." Her eyes flickered to the rest of the Pack. "And I heard what you spoke to one another, when you thought yourselves alone."

Remus cursed silently. Damn it, she knows about the prophecy!

Maybe, but I don't think that's what she's talking about, Danger said, looking carefully at the other woman.

"We said much to one another," said Sirius, making the "what-the-hell" gesture again. "Words of comfort, mostly, nothing of interest."

"On the contrary, one thing which interested me greatly," Narcissa said, leaning forward. She looked directly at Danger. "You have prophetic dreams."

"I do," Danger admitted, meeting Narcissa's pale green-gray eyes.

"You spoke rhyming lines from such a dream, which named a light and a flower. The light was called haughty, and the flower would bring

him low.” Narcissa turned back to Sirius. “I believe this dream speaks of my husband and myself. And I wish to fulfill it.”

Silence filled the room for a moment.

“Do you have a plan?” Sirius asked finally.

“I do.”

“Wait,” said Aletha suddenly.

Narcissa looked at her oddly, as if just realizing she was there.

“I would hear, if you will tell us, what transpired between our children,” Aletha said, stumbling slightly over the formal idiom but managing well enough.

Narcissa looked at Sirius, who nodded. “There is time enough,” she said. “I will tell you. Your son and daughter – you consider them as such, I believe – were friendly and courteous to my son. They played with him, something no other child of his acquaintance has done. Most children Draco knows are very like him, half-spoiled, half-abused, and altogether unchildlike. Your children were, I believe, a good influence on him.”

Harry, a good influence. Now that’s saying something. This Draco kid must really be a little monster.

As she said – half-spoiled, half-abused... Remus looked at the boy in question, who was curled into a tight ball in the armchair, obviously trying not to fall asleep. I feel sorry for him.

So do I.

“While they were with my son, your children accomplished three rather remarkable things,” Narcissa was saying. “First, and probably by accident, they freed our house-elf.”

“How?” Sirius asked, shooting a look at the little creature, who was standing rather nervously in the corner of the room.

“They were playing with a ball made of their knotted socks. Draco threw the ball and Dobby caught it.”

That would do it. Accident or not.

“Second, they stopped my husband from harming Draco.” Narcissa smiled, for the first time with something resembling humor. “They ran into him from the side. He lost his balance and struck his head against the mantel.”

They were busy, weren’t they?

“Third, the boy displayed an ability I believe you are unaware of.” Narcissa leaned back in her chair. “He is a Parselmouth.”

Sirius actually jerked in surprise. Aletha made an unbelieving noise.

A Parselmouth? HARRY?

What’s that?

He can understand snakes, and speak to them in their own language. It’s very rare, it’s always been considered Dark – the founder of Slytherin House could do it, that’s why their symbol is a snake.

Oh.

“I came upon them in the hallway after they had incapacitated my husband, the Potter boy having just managed to lock the door of Draco’s room by speaking in Parseltongue. I reopened the door, Stunned my husband, and brought the children here. Dobby told me, when I called him, that Draco had freed him, but he agreed to stay long enough to tend your daughter until you arrived.”

“Thank you for your trouble, Dobby,” Aletha said to the house-elf, smiling at him.

“Little mistress Meghan was no trouble,” Dobby said shyly. “She is a good baby.”

“Narcissa, you Stunned Lucius,” Sirius said over this. “Why?”

“Because I did not wish him to wake and find me speaking peaceably to his enemies,” Narcissa said in a use-your-mind tone. “Because I wish to transact business with you. If you would care to speak now of business.”

“I would. What transaction do you propose?”

“A simple trade of services. To begin with, your freedom.” Narcissa reached into a pocket of her robes and extracted four wands, displaying them briefly before returning them to the pocket. “I will then travel to the Ministry of Magic to provide proof that my husband was a willing servant of the Dark Lord. He should subsequently be arrested and sentenced to Azkaban, removing the threat he otherwise poses to you and your family.”

“That would be a great service to us,” Sirius said, waving his ring finger.

He thinks she’s got something up her sleeve, truth or not.

“What do you wish in return?”

Narcissa gave a slow smile. “I wish you to exact both justice and revenge on Lucius Malfoy. I wish you to take his greatest treasure and ruin it while saving it.”

“You speak in riddles, Narcissa,” Sirius said impatiently. “Use plain words.”

Narcissa took a deep, trembling breath. “Plain words, then,” she said. “Do to my fool of a husband what he planned to do to you. Take my son, Sirius. Take him and raise him as your own.”

Another silence, this one longer than the last, blanketed the room.

“Lucius’ greatest love, besides himself, is his family line,” Narcissa said, almost desperately, Danger thought. “You can end it, Sirius. Make Lucius the last Malfoy. Give Draco your name – our name – and make the house of Black great again.”

“You desire greatness,” Sirius said slowly, eyes fixed on Narcissa. “But no son of mine will ever be a Slytherin.”

“So much the better,” said Narcissa heatedly. “Teach him your ways, Sirius. Raise my son to be a Gryffindor. I watched him cower before his father, and I watched your children fight back, and I was ashamed. I want more for my son than I had – ”

To everyone’s astonishment, Narcissa slid from her chair and fell gracefully onto her knees. “I beg of you,” she said imploringly. “You remember, Sirius, you remember what our homes were like as children. I cannot bear the thought of my Draco in another place like this. I beg of you, give him a chance. Teach him what we were never taught. Teach him to love and be loved.”

“I do not speak only for myself,” Sirius said, his voice tight, as if he were holding something back. “I must consult with my – friends.”

He had had to stop himself from saying ‘Pack’, Danger suspected. She turned to Aletha. “What do you think?” she asked quietly, suspecting what the answer would be.

Aletha looked over at the sleeping Draco and shrugged. “Always room for one more, I guess.” Her casual manner could not disguise her concern for the situation, and Danger knew that she had guessed correctly – Aletha, too, had wished there was something she could do for this child, and was not going to pass up this opportunity to truly make a difference.

You know my vote, Danger said silently. So two for, none against so far...

Three for. But Sirius speaks for us tonight. So the final decision is his. Remus made a series of signals to Sirius, who was watching the discussions carefully. Sirius nodded, then turned back to Narcissa, getting to his feet.

“We have spoken,” he said deliberately, and reached his hand down to her. “It will be done. Your child will be our child, no less than any of the others. We will raise him in love and give him all he needs.”

Narcissa slowly took the offered hand and rose to her feet with its help. “I have a contract prepared,” she said, seeming almost in a daze. “So that you will be his legal guardians. Will you make it binding?”

Good Lord. Making something magically binding can mean signing in blood.

“I will,” Sirius said.

“As will I.” Aletha rose from her seat. “The boy will need a mother, after all.”

Narcissa looked at Remus and Danger. “And you?” she asked.

What’s a little blood between friends? Danger asked rhetorically. She got up, laying Neenie on the couch, thumb still in mouth.

Harry roused as Remus stood up. “We go home soon?” he said sleepily.

“Soon, Harry-kins,” Remus said, setting the boy gently down beside Hermione. “Soon.”

The adults gathered around the desk, where Narcissa produced a parchment scroll and a sharp, black quill. She signed first, and Danger winced as every movement of the quill was reproduced on the back of Narcissa’s writing hand. Well, I suppose that’s one way to do it.

Sirius signed first, then Aletha. Remus took his turn, and Danger was last. Inwardly, she made a face. This is going to hurt.

It did, but it was over quickly, and the contract was complete. When the glistening signatures were dry, Narcissa rolled the scroll up and gave it to Sirius. "Dobby," she said over her shoulder. "Please wake Draco."

The house-elf scurried over to the corner and shook the boy by the shoulder. "Little master," he said in his squeaky voice. "Little master, you must wake up. Your mother wants you."

Draco roused at once, looking around with fear plain in his eyes.

No more fear, Danger wanted to tell him. You don't have to be afraid anymore. But she held her peace. This was Narcissa's moment, not hers.

Narcissa knelt beside her son's chair. "Tell me your full name," she said.

"Draco Regulus Malfoy," the boy recited, pronouncing the difficult names carefully.

"That was your name when you were born," Narcissa said, her voice smooth and utterly controlled. "But that is not your name now. Listen to me carefully. Your name is Draco Regulus Black. These men – " She gestured behind her, to Sirius and Remus. "They are fathers to you now. These women will be your mothers." Aletha and Danger smiled at Draco, who looked at them in confusion, then looked back at his mother.

"Do you like the children you played with today, Draco?" she asked him. He nodded timidly. "They are your brother and your sister now. You will never be lonely again. You will go far away from here, to live with them. You will be a good boy for your new family. Won't you?"

It was obvious that Draco had understood almost nothing of this. "I be good," he said hesitantly. "I a'ways be good."

"I know you will," Narcissa said. "I – " Her voice broke. She dropped her face into her hands, shoulders shaking. Draco stared at her, bewildered.

After only a moment, Narcissa raised her head. "I will never see you again, Draco," she said very quietly. "Come here."

Draco slid from the chair and stood before his mother. She placed her hand on his head and stroked his hair, once, twice, three times. Then she rose and faced the Pack.

"Teach him to forget," she said. "When you bring him into the light, do not let him remember the darkness. Erase my name and my face from his memory. It will be easier."

"It would also be wrong," Remus said. "We teach the other children to remember the parents who loved them and made sacrifices for them. The name of Lucius Malfoy he will forget, but you he will remember, and honor you for doing right. As we do." He bowed his head to her. The rest of the Pack did the same.

"I thank you," Narcissa said formally, but Danger could see tears still shining in her eyes, tears the woman refused to shed.

The grandfather clock in the corner whirred, then chimed for half past the hour. The sound seemed to break Narcissa's trance. "Take him now," she said, giving her son a slight push, so that he stumbled forward toward the Pack. "Take him and go. This fireplace will take you home. Fulfill your side of the bargain, and I shall fulfill mine."

"It is agreed," Sirius said, accepting the wand Narcissa handed to him.

She drew her own and touched its tip to his. "It is agreed," she echoed.

Remus took the rest of the wands from her and handed Aletha and Danger theirs. Danger pocketed hers and hefted the sleeping

Hermione. Why is it that sleeping children are always twice as heavy as they are awake? Remus took Harry again, and Aletha was already holding Meghan.

So that leaves Sirius with Draco. Oh boy...

"Come here, Draco," Sirius said, going down on one knee. Draco did as he was told, warily, looking like a puppy unsure if it was going to be praised or kicked. "I'm going to pick you up. Understand?"

Draco nodded, but he still stiffened when Sirius put his hands under the boy's arms and lifted him.

"You need to hold on to me," Sirius told him. "Put your arms around my neck. That's right."

Narcissa turned away and left the room without another word.

Danger's vision grayed for a moment, and she stumbled backward. Aletha moved to catch her with her free arm. Must be tireder than I thought.

"Was that you?" Remus asked, looking grave.

"Was what me?"

"You spoke."

"I don't remember saying anything. What did I say?"

"The flower plucks itself; it withers even now," Sirius recited.

"Great, now I don't even have to be asleep to be cryptic."

"We're all half-asleep, I think," Aletha said. She looked at Meghan, then at Hermione and Harry. "Some of us more than others. Let's finish this conversation at home, shall we?"

“Sounds like a good idea.”

One by one, they stepped into the fire, called out “The Marauders’ Den!”, and vanished.

Fragments of broken glass lay on the floor of Narcissa Malfoy’s bedroom. A blue liquid dripped from some of them.

There are poisons which act quickly, and poisons which do not. There are even poisons which give their victim a certain, measured term of life, twenty-four hours for instance.

Much can be done in twenty-four hours.

(A/N: So, what did you all think? (I have a teacher who claims this is the worst way to open a discussion. So this is for him.)

Love and thanks to all! Happy holidays, everyone, in case I don’t post for a while! Next chapter, “Key to His Heart”, will be up ASAP!)

Chapter 21: Key to His Heart

Remus stepped out of the fireplace into the Den's music room. He took a deep breath, feeling himself relax at the familiar surroundings.

Safe. Home, and safe.

Harry jerked awake as the fireplace howled. "We home!" he said happily.

"That's right, Greeneyes, we're home." Remus let Harry slide to the ground and turned back to the fire to catch Danger, who still wasn't very good at Floo traveling. With his other hand, he drew his wand and flicked the lights on.

Multitasking, are we?

Is that even a word?

Does it matter? The fireplace howled again, this time waking Neenie, who gave a little whine as Danger put her down. And can you turn that off, please?

No, and yes. Remus removed the alarm spell from the fireplace as Aletha exited the green flames and made for the sofa. A moment later, Sirius emerged, setting Draco quickly on the floor and sinking into a chair.

Good. We're all here.

"All" being a little more than it was this morning, of course.

"Why he here?" Neenie demanded, pointing to Draco, who looked understandably nervous.

"He's going to stay with us," Danger said. "He's a cub of the Pack now, like you two and Meghan. Why don't you take Draco around and show him our Den, and tell him what some of the rules are."

“OK.” Harry took Draco’s hand and tugged him toward the door of the music room, Neenie bringing up the rear.

You just want them out of sight when we all collapse.

That, and Draco knows them and not us. We’re going to have to introduce ourselves to the child we just adopted.

But that can wait. Remus shut the door behind the children. Right this instant, I don’t think we should do much except recover.

We can’t put it off too long. But I agree. That was an incredible... Danger checked her watch. Six hours.

“So, is everyone alive?” Aletha asked dryly.

“Ask me again in the morning.” Sirius buried his hands in his hair. “Merlin, I haven’t practiced that kind of negotiating since I was fifteen. I wasn’t even sure I remembered how to do it.”

“You were wonderful,” Danger said admiringly. “You were so cool about it, even when she pulled out stuff you weren’t expecting at all.”

“She did take me a little aback with the apology,” Sirius admitted. “I’m sure she did it on purpose, to rattle me, but it backfired – after that, just about nothing could surprise me.” He got up and went over to sit next to Aletha.

“Except, of course, what she wanted us to do,” said Remus.

“Yes. Except that.” Sirius reached over and stroked Meghan’s face gently. “Do you think we’ll be able to reach him?”

“I hope so,” Danger said.

You hope, or you know?

Now why would you ask me that?

Because you have a certain tone you use when you know something that we don't. I call it your "insufferably smug true-dream tone".

Hmph. Remus wasn't sure exactly how Danger had transmitted that mentally, but she had. All right, if you must have it, I think the second half of my latest dream was about him.

The one about keys to the heart?

Yes. It mentioned you and Letha as holding them. What do both of you do that Sirius and I don't?

Remus loaded his tone with smugness. Oh, good, an easy one.

One of these days, Remus Lupin, I am going to hit you so hard...

"What's a cub'a the Pack?" Draco asked as the children climbed the stairs.

"Cub is a Pack word for a kid. It means you gonna live here, with us, an' be our brother," Harry said.

"You don't never have to go back to the other house," Neenie chimed in from behind them. "We show you our bedroom. You prob'ly sleep there too, so we gotta share the beds till we get another one."

Draco wasn't listening to this. "I don't ever have to go back to the manor?"

"What's the manor?" Harry asked.

"It where I live. Where we were until we came here."

"No. You never gotta go back there. You live here now, at the Den."

Draco shook his head as Neenie reached up on tiptoe and flicked on the upstairs hallway lights. "Who those people?" he asked as Harry opened the door of the cubs' room. "The ones who hugged you, who bringed us here?"

“They our Pack, silly,” Neenie said with a giggle. “Danger my sister – she look like me – and Letha got dark skin. Padfoot gots black hair and Moony gots brown, only he makes it blond when he goes out. Harry and me haveta get our hair changed before we go out too.”

“Who’s Harry?”

“Me,” said the owner of that name.

“You said your name was Jamie.”

“Jamie my out-of-den name. It for pretend, because people looking for me. My real name’s Harry Potter.”

Draco’s eyes went big. “You’re Harry Potter?”

Harry nodded.

“You got a scar on your forehead?” Draco demanded.

Harry lifted his bangs to show it.

“Wow,” Draco breathed. “I heared about you. You famous.”

Harry shrugged. “I know. I haveta be a warrior an’ fight evil. But first I gotta grow up.”

Draco looked between Harry and Neenie. “C’n I be a warrior too?”

“Sure. Neenie is. Meghan will be, when she gets bigger.”

“Right now all she does is cry an’ make a mess,” Neenie said disgustedly.

Draco smiled a little. Then a funny look crossed his face. “I gotta go pee,” he said very quietly.

“Toilet down the hall,” Harry said, pointing. “Want me t’go with you?”

“Yeah,” Draco said.

“Be back in a minute, Neenie,” Harry said as he got up.

“I never been to someone else’s house before,” said Draco as the boys walked down the hall. “Am I really gonna stay?”

Harry nodded. “Danger said.”

Draco sniffed. “What that smell?”

Harry sniffed too, and smiled. “Hot choc’late. You like hot choc’late?”

“What is it?”

Harry stared. “You never had hot choc’late?”

Draco shook his head. “Is it good?”

Harry nodded hard. “You gotta try it, you’ll love it. I wait for you, then we go downstairs and get some.”

“OK.” Draco went into the bathroom and closed the door. Danger whisked cocoa powder, sugar, and vanilla extract together in a saucepan, adding just enough water to turn it into a slurry.

Another thing Remus and I agree on – chocolate can cure just about anything.

She added the milk and stirred the mixture carefully, waiting for it to boil. From the music room, she could hear the plinks of Remus tuning up.

Sirius was content, for the moment, just to sit and contemplate his daughter’s sleeping face.

I remember laughing at James when he’d sit for hours watching Harry sleep. I was more interested in him awake and playing. But now I think I understand...

And I can't even begin to imagine doing what Narcissa did. I underestimated her, all those years I thought she was just a self-absorbed shallow Dark b...er, witch.

He snorted at his own folly. Why am I censoring my own thoughts? It's not like I've got a link with Letha like Remus and Danger have. No one else in my head. Just good old me, Sirius Black.

Meghan stirred, and Sirius rocked her. No one else in my head... but in my heart – Merlin, my heart's full up. When I was little, I used to wish I had just one person to love me, and now I have six – seven, if we can salvage Draco. I hope we can. Narcissa was right, on both counts – Draco deserves a chance, and it'll be one in the eye for Malfoy. If he ever finds out. Narcissa's unlikely to go telling people she gave her son to me...

A herd of hippogriffs descended the stairs and charged the kitchen. "Hot choc'late!"

"In a minute," Danger answered, laughing. "Honestly, there's only three of you, how in the world can you make so much noise?"

"Practice," Neenie said smugly.

The brown liquid in the saucepan came to the boil. Danger turned it off, arranged seven mugs on her favorite tray, and tapped her wand against the pan. The hot chocolate vanished. Danger slipped her wand into each mug and waved it in a circle, allowing the chocolate to flow from it and fill the mug.

"C'n we have marshmallows?" Neenie asked pleadingly.

"Go get them out." Danger watched her sister expertly drag one of the chairs over to the pantry, open the door, climb up on the chair and get the marshmallows out, and jump down again, all within one minute. We're going to have to start putting things under magical lock and key if we don't want them found... high shelves are not going to do it any more.

“Go on, then, you three.” She herded the children in front of her to the music room, carrying the tray carefully. “And if any of you spill so much as a drop in here...” She stopped suddenly.

“What?” Harry asked.

“You have to help clean it up,” Danger finished, keenly aware that her usual jesting threats would not be taken lightly by the newest member of the Pack.

A child who has actually been beaten, who has probably never heard a joke before... God, I hope we did right, I hope we're not in over our heads...

But what else could we have done?

Aletha began to play a series of notes in the bass of the piano, a slow, predictable progression. As the pattern repeated itself, she added treble notes to compliment the bass. Danger and the children came into the room as the third repetition began and Remus added the melody line on his violin.

I do love this piece. There are so many different things you can do with it, so many ways to ornament the basic structure.

Movement beside her caught her eye. She looked down.

Draco was standing right beside her, watching her hands on the keys. When he saw she'd noticed him, he backed quickly away. She smiled at him, and took her right hand off the keys for a moment to motion him closer. Hesitantly, he returned to the place he'd been standing a moment before.

Is he afraid I'm going to hit him? For being curious? Surely not...

She lifted her left hand to turn the page of her music, and Draco flinched, just slightly, but perceptibly.

All right, maybe he is.

Damn you, Lucius Malfoy.

Very slowly, Draco lifted his own hand, to touch the piano keys. He didn't press them down, only slid his fingers along them, and he was very careful not to get in Aletha's way.

I don't think he's ever seen a piano before. Or at least he hasn't been allowed to touch one. And he obviously likes music. I wonder what kind of singing voice he has?

Remus caught her eye and nodded, and they brought the piece to a close. Draco sighed a little and took his hand off the keys, turning away.

Aletha began the introduction to a favorite song of Harry and Neenie, who shushed each other noisily as they recognized it. Draco turned back around with an amazed expression as Aletha began to sing.

The song asked questions about things like rainbows – why were there so many songs about them?

Out of the corner of her eye, Aletha saw Sirius lay the sleeping Meghan on the couch and come over to stand behind her.

After all, they were only illusions, with nothing to hide.

She could hear him kneeling down on the carpet behind the bench, putting himself at about Draco's height.

Now the song changed tone, saying, in effect, "Well, that's what some people say, anyway."

One of Sirius' hands made its way into her line of vision.

The song stated boldly that some people were wrong.

Draco saw the hand too, and watched it mistrustfully as it traveled slowly toward him, but at least he didn't flinch away.

Someday, said the song, they'd find out the connection...

Sirius rested his hand on Draco's shoulder. Draco's breathing turned a little shaky, but he didn't move. Aletha smiled and began the second verse.

Very slowly, in time with the music, Sirius began to stroke Draco's hair. Aletha's smile broadened as she noticed that Draco was, ever so little, leaning his head into the stroking.

Sirius brought his other hand up to rub Draco's back as Aletha changed keys. The boy was trembling now, but he didn't move. It was as if he both feared what was happening, and feared to lose it.

Aletha felt a feather-light touch on her arm, hastily withdrawn. She finished the song with a flourish on the piano, and felt the touch again – only this time it didn't vanish instantly. She smiled at Draco encouragingly and put her hand gently over his.

"You can call me Letha, Draco," she said. "And this is Padfoot."

The boy nodded. "I know," he said. "Harry'n'Neenie told me who you were." He turned away, looking at the other two adults. "That's Moony, and Danger," he said, pointing them out. "Right?"

"That's right," Remus said. Danger smiled and waved.

Draco turned back to Aletha with an expression that suggested he was nerving himself up for something. "Do I haveta go home?" he blurted out.

"No," Sirius said. "You don't have to go back to that house ever again, Draco."

"Not ever?"

"Do you want to go back?" Aletha asked.

Draco hesitated, then shook his head.

“Then you won’t. This is your home now.”

“Will my father come here?” Draco asked with a trace of fear in his voice.

“No,” said at least three people simultaneously, and emphatically. Draco cringed a little.

“We’re not angry, Draco, not at you, anyway,” Aletha hastened to reassure the boy. “We’re angry with your father, for hitting you. That was wrong of him.”

Draco gave a little shiver as Sirius resumed rubbing his back. “They said you... don’t hit,” he said slowly, looking at Harry and Neenie. “Not ever.”

“They’re right,” Aletha said with a fond smile in the direction of the indicated two, who were dunking marshmallows in one another’s hot chocolate. “We won’t hit you, Draco. You’re old enough to understand words now. We might scold you if you do something wrong, but we will never hit you. All right?”

Draco nodded, but his face indicated he’d believe it when he saw it. “What’s that called?” he asked, pointing at the piano.

“This is a piano, but what I do with it is called music. Did you like the music?”

“Yeah. It was pretty.” Draco looked at Remus. “What’s yours?” he asked.

“That’s a violin.” Remus got up, to Neenie’s annoyance since she was leaning on him, and handed Danger his mug. “Do you want to look at it?”

Draco’s eyes widened. “Can I?”

Remus took the violin off the top of the piano and held it where Draco could see it. "I make the music by bringing my bow across the strings," he said. "Do you want to hear something?"

Draco nodded, and Remus set the violin and began to play. The little boy's eyes were fixed on Remus' hands, Aletha noticed, so much so that he hadn't noticed Sirius moving a little closer behind him.

Stalking the wild child. Just don't frighten him, love, please...
I have to be careful. If I scare him now, he may never trust any of us.

But he likes the touch. He's probably never been touched with love before this – I know I wasn't. It took Prongs and Moony years to get me used to backslaps and the occasional hug.

Cautiously, Sirius scooted just a little closer to Draco. He was sitting cross-legged now, right behind the boy, whose attention was fixated on Remus.

So if I can just get him to sit on my lap...

Or maybe next to me. I'll try that first.

He tapped the boy gently on the shoulder. Draco jumped and looked behind him guiltily. Sirius smiled and patted the spot beside him. Draco looked blank.

He doesn't know what it means?

"Come sit down," Sirius said quietly. "So your legs don't get tired."

Draco nodded and sat – a good foot away from Sirius.

Well, it's a start.

Remus finished his piece and began another, this one quick and lively. Draco perked up a little and leaned forward, listening hard. Harry and Neenie, by contrast, yawned in unison.

It is awfully late. We'll need to go to bed soon. Den tonight, I think. Everyone's rattled, we need the reassurance. And Draco can sleep as close or as far away from everyone else as he wants.

Suddenly Sirius noticed that the distance between himself and Draco had been diminished by six inches – but he hadn't moved.

Well, well. It seems someone is responding already.

He kept his eyes carefully front, flicking sidelong glances at Draco, and was rewarded by seeing the boy hitch himself marginally closer.

As I thought. He's dying for someone to touch him, but he's afraid that same someone will suddenly decide, for no reason at all, to hurt him. And from his life experience, that's a perfectly reasonable thing to think.

He wanted to pull Draco into his arms, hold him tight, ruffle his hair and tell him it would never happen again, but he knew that would only scare the boy.

But it never will happen again, Sirius vowed silently as Draco took another cautious scoot towards him. You have my word, Draco. Never again.

Draco moved again – they were almost touching now. Sirius slowly extended his hand, making sure Draco could see it all the time, and placed it on the boy's knee.

Draco placed his own hand hesitantly on top of Sirius'. Sirius turned his hand over and gently squeezed Draco's, turning to meet the boy's startled eyes.

"You belong to us now," he said. "You belong to the Pack."

For the first time since he'd met Draco, the small, pale face held something akin to hope.

Harry lent Draco some pajamas, since he didn't have any of his own. "We'll go shopping tomorrow," Danger told the children. "Or, rather, today. It's after midnight."

“Which means it is high time for cubs to be in the den,” Aletha said. “Come on, everyone, scoot.”

They scooted, down the stairs, through the front room, down the hall, and into the den room, where Neenie stepped decorously onto the mattresses while Harry took a running leap onto them. Draco hung back a little. “I a’ways sleep alone at home,” he said, with a trace of arrogance in his voice.

“Sleep wherever you like,” Remus said, pulling a blanket free and tossing it toward Draco. “That’s what denning is about.”

“Padfoot, tell a story?” Neenie asked sleepily.

“All right,” Sirius said. “But a short one.”

As he began to tell part of his story of Samuel and Alison, a tale of lords and ladies and great adventures which was one of the children’s favorites, Danger noticed Draco inching closer, clutching the blanket. Eventually he sat down in a space no one else was using, near what would have been the bottom of one of the beds, beneath Harry and Neenie’s feet.

I think we’re getting there. Or at least starting to get there. He wants this so much, and he’s afraid of it at the same time...

We are going to have to be royally careful not to scare him, not even to startle him if we can avoid it. We’ll just include him in all our usual activities, and let him do as much or as little as he wants, until he understands that he’s just as much our child as Neenie or Harry – no more, no less. And that we love him.

I hope he can understand love...

Draco came awake all at once. He looked around, and a little moan escaped him. He was back in his own room at the manor, in his own bed, with his father still lying crumpled on the floor.

It had all been a dream, he knew it. The music, and the story, and the strange but wonderful feeling of having a grown person touch him, caress him – a dream. Escaping his father – only a dream. He should have known – didn't his father always say "You can't get away from me", just before the blow fell?

He tried as hard as he could to hold in his tears, but he was only four. Soon he was crying, the thin, despairing wail of a child who has dreamed of a fairyland and awakened to his cold, cruel reality. Sobbing, he curled up on his side, hiding his face in the blankets.

I want to go back to the Den.

I want to go home.

"What are we doing back here?" Sirius said in annoyance.

Danger blinked. They were standing in the main hallway of the Malfoys' manor. Experimentally, she stamped her foot, and felt the floor rebound ever so slightly. "It's a dream," she said.

Should I be jealous that you're sharing with both of us now?

"Don't be ridiculous, please," Danger said without bothering to turn around.

"He can't help it, it's habit by now," Sirius said, grinning. Danger stepped neatly aside as Remus went for Sirius, who took off running.

"Boys will be boys," Aletha said with a sigh as she stepped from the shadows.

Remus skidded to a halt at the foot of the stairs. "Say that again."

"What, boys will be boys?"

"Yes. Everyone, quiet." Remus looked up the stairs for a moment. Very carefully, so as not to disturb him, Danger tapped their connection. As usual, everything was a little clearer to Remus' senses than to her own – the sights, the scents –

And the sounds.

Someone's crying up there. A child.

Draco!

Remus took the stairs two at a time, Danger on his heels. Sirius and Aletha were only a step behind her. "What's wrong?" Aletha asked as they ran.

"Draco's here – must be his dream – " Danger got out.

Aletha swore and picked up her pace a little.

At the top of the stairs, Remus turned right without hesitating, running down a long hallway lined with doors. He turned left at the end of it, into a narrower hallway, and ran to a door about halfway down its length with entwined snakes painted on it. He yanked it open, and Danger ran past him, into the room.

She almost stepped on Lucius, who was lying across her path, head on the hearthstone. I'm not interested in you. She turned left just in time to see Draco sit bolt upright, staring at her.

"There you are!" Danger crossed the distance to the bed in three steps and snatched him up as she would have Harry or Neenie. "Are you all right?"

Draco held onto her as if afraid she might disappear. "You real?" he asked in a trembling voice as Remus, Sirius, and Aletha piled into the room.

" I'm as real as you are," Danger said comfortingly. There, reassuring without being a lie.

The rest of the Pack gathered around them, reaching out to touch Draco's arms or shoulders or stroke his head.

“Draco, do you ever have scary dreams?” Remus asked. The boy nodded. “That’s what this is. Just a scary dream. The Den is real – we’re real – and when you wake up, that’s where you’ll be. Understand?”

Draco nodded again, then laid his head on Danger’s shoulder. Tears were still sliding out of his eyes, but Danger could feel him relaxing against her, accepting her touch.

Well, at least he’s not afraid of us any more. But did it have to happen this way?

Yes, said a voice in her head. And not one she was expecting. Until now, his father has been the greatest power in his life. You must show him that power broken and defeated. Only then will he trust you fully, and his new life begin.

Yes, oh-great-whatever-you-are-that-usually-talks-to-me-in-bad-poetry.

Don’t be impudent.

But it’s what I do best...

There was no reply. Instead, Lucius Malfoy groaned. Draco whimpered.

“Don’t be afraid,” Remus said. “He won’t touch you.”

“Just let him try.” Aletha grinned. “Sirius, do you remember that sandwich maneuver we worked out your sixth year?”

“You bet.” Sirius returned her grin. “Plus, I have a few things I want to say to yucky Lucky here...”

Remus chuckled. “Yucky Lucky? How long have you been waiting to use that?”

“A long time,” Sirius said, strolling forward as Malfoy groaned again and opened his eyes. “Well, well, Lucius Malfoy, look at you.”

“Black,” Malfoy said in disbelief, struggling to sit up. “How – how did you – ” He looked beyond Sirius, to the rest of the Pack. To Danger, sitting on the edge of the bed with Draco in her arms.

Malfoy catapulted to his feet. “GET YOUR HANDS OFF MY SON!”

“Please don’t shout, you’ll frighten him,” Aletha said.

“He needs to be frightened,” Malfoy said, advancing.

Remus stepped in front of him. “Leave the boy alone, Lucius,” he said mildly.

“Or what? You’ll bite me?” Malfoy sneered.

Remus smiled ferally. “Don’t tempt me. Stay away from my son.”

“Your son? Your son? What are you talking about, werewolf?”

“He belongs to us now,” Aletha said from Malfoy’s right. “Your lovely wife signed a contract with us, giving us full guardianship rights.”

“She has no right to do that. Not without my consent.”

“Well, as it happens, she does,” Sirius drawled. “Criminals have no parental rights under magical law, if I remember my History of Magic classes correctly. And you’re a criminal. Or you will be, as soon as the Aurors get here.”

“Aurors, what Aurors?”

“The Aurors I assume they’ll be sending to arrest you,” Aletha said smugly. “Once Narcissa gets done with her testimony.”

“She’s in London ratting you out as we speak,” Sirius finished gleefully. “You’re toast, Lucky-boy.”

Malfoy goggled at them.

“I suggest you enjoy the Ministry holding cells while you can,” Sirius went on maliciously. “Azkaban isn’t nearly so comfortable.”

Danger and Remus exchanged amused glances. Trust Sirius not only to remember what the bastard said to him, but to repeat it back.

Sounds like a good idea to me...

“The Malfoy line ends with you, Lucius,” Remus said, seeming to gain height as he took on his full authority as leader of the Pack. “Malfoy will be remembered as the name of a criminal and a fool, brought down by his own wife.”

“Draco Black,” Danger said musingly, stroking that little boy’s back. “I rather like the sound of that, don’t you? Draco Black, devoted brother of Harry Potter...”

“And a Gryffindor, of course,” Sirius added.

Malfoy let out a strangled cry of rage and charged at Danger. Sirius and Aletha moved in unison, swiftly pinning him between them and flinging him back.

“Honestly, Lucius, don’t you know anything about nature?” Sirius asked, chuckling slightly. “Never get between a cub and his Pack.”

“Besides,” Remus added, “even if you did get to him, it wouldn’t do you any good. We’re not really here.”

“This is all a dream,” Danger said with a flirtatious smile. “Look behind you. There’s your body.”

Lucius' body was indeed still lying where it had been. The dream-Lucius stared from it, to himself, back to it, and could not seem to say a word.

"But the part about Narcissa, and the Aurors, that's true," Sirius said, grinning. "And they should be here any minute – "

The door crashed open, making Draco jump again. "And here they are," Remus said as two wizards burst into the room, wands out. "Sirius, look who it is."

"But he never goes out on raids any more!" Aletha said.

"I think it's a personal thing," Sirius said, shooting a look at Lucius, who had backed into a corner at the entrance of the Aurors. "If I recall correctly, Malfoy, you tried to off him at least once over the course of the war, and Alastor Moody has a long memory."

"What I remember is you flipping him off at your trial, after you were acquitted," Aletha said with a short laugh. "That in itself would bring him here to see justice done."

The Aurors, working quickly, had already tied Malfoy's hands behind him, gagged him, and ensured that he didn't have his wand. Now, Moody pointed his wand at the still form and growled out, "Ennervate."

"Have a nice life," Danger said sweetly. "Draco, wave bye-bye to the nasty man."

Draco turned half around and gave a little wave. The Pack waved with him, all of them beaming.

The dream-Malfoy, still staring at the Pack, disappeared as the real one woke up. Looking furious, Malfoy tried to say something, but the gag thwarted him.

Sirius laughed. "Let's go home," he said. "All of us."
July 26, 1984

Dear friends,

Would you have had anything to do with the interesting news in the Daily Prophet this morning?

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore
July 26, 1984

Dear Professor,

Why, of course not. What would ever make you think that?

Join us in celebration – our newest cub's birthday is today. His picture is enclosed. And no, we did not do anything illegal. Much.

Yours,

GGL

(in a different handwriting) P.S. We need to talk face-to-face. Would you be willing to come over for tea?

RL

(A/N: Don't be expecting chapters this long all the time, now... consider this a Christmas present... (as if I could give you one better than J.K. Rowling already did! JULY 16 2005!) :runs around screaming happily:

Attention everyone: Our favorite Potions Master will make an appearance in this story, and get his greasy little rear kicked. Which member of the pack would you like to do the kicking?

Attention once again: Care for a sneak preview into the future of the pack? Like, oh, twelve years or so down the line? Check out my favorite stories page and click on the one called "Draco's Nightmare" – my wonderful beta has written a one-shot for your entertainment pleasure!

Thanks everyone! OK, now I can definitely state that I will not be posting again till after Christmas, so Merry Christmas, everyone, even if you don't celebrate it! And I'll try to get one or two more chapters posted in 2004!)

Chapter 22: An Important Day

Lucius Malfoy huddled on the floor of his cell, dignity lost in rage. Alastor Moody had kept him gagged until they reached the headquarters of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, then had put a Silencing Charm on him for as long as it took to administer Veritaserum. He had lifted the Charm then, but asked only one question: "Have you ever used an Unforgivable Curse?"

Lucius had tried to resist, knowing the answer would mean the end of life worth living for him, but the potion had dragged the answer, the true answer, out of him: "Yes."

Then he quickly took a breath to tell the Auror about Black and Lupin, about the Potter boy, about where they were hiding, but –

"Silencio!" Moody had snapped again, before he had a chance to speak. "I'm not interested in anything else. With that, and his wife's testimony, we've got all the evidence we'll need. Take him away, we'll send him over in the morning."

So now he was alone in this miserable place, his life in ruins, and there was nothing, nothing he could do to take revenge for it...

Someone was coming. He whipped around.

The person stopped in front of his cell, pointed a wand at him, and whispered the countercharm to the Silencer. "I want to help you," she said quietly. "I'm certain this must be some kind of trick, someone has framed you for this... Is there anything I can do, anything at all?"

Lucius considered his options. "Do you know a woman named Aletha Freeman?" he asked finally.

"Of course."

"She knows more than she's telling about Sirius Black. Investigating her house would not go amiss."

“Thank you, Mr. Malfoy. I’ll remember that. I’m afraid I have to renew the charm, so that no one knows I was here...”

Lucius grimaced. “Very well.”

At least I know I will have some measure of revenge...

From somewhere nearby, he heard quiet laughter. “Plot away, Lucius, plot away,” said a woman’s cool voice. “They are beyond your reach now. As is Draco... as I will soon be...”

Lucius snarled silently in frustration, wishing he had his wand for just one second, long enough to commit one final murder...

Daily Prophet, Thursday 26 July 1984

LUCIUS, NARCISSA MALFOY ARRESTED

Wife confesses own, husband’s misdeeds

By Rita Skeeter, Special Reporter

Narcissa Malfoy, one of the leading lights of the pure-blood social scene, last night turned herself in to Ministry custody, claiming that she and her husband, Lucius, were both willing followers of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, something both vigorously denied not quite three years ago. Lucius Malfoy was taken into custody at his home later that same night.

Mrs. Malfoy provided an extensive list of the use of Unforgivable Curses by both herself and her husband, which was verified by Mr. Malfoy under the influence of the controversial truth potion Veritaserum. The use of an Unforgivable Curse carries an automatic penalty of a life sentence in Azkaban, where both Malfoys will probably be sent within the next few days...

Andromeda Tonks shook her head. “Narcy, I never understood you,” she said aloud, letting the paper fall to the table. “It was the right thing to do, but why now?”

Something struck her. She reached for the paper again. "What about Draco?" she said, scanning the columns of text. "Come on, there has to be something here about him – who's going to take care of him? He's only four, it isn't his fault his parents are criminals..."

"Andy, who are you talking to?" Ted Tonks said, walking into the kitchen.

"Myself. The newspaper. Look at this – my sister's been arrested."

"Another one?"

She punched him in the shoulder. "I only have two."

"I know..." Ted looked through the article, muttering to himself. "Isn't this the one with a son? Drake or something?"

"Draco. I know, you'd think there'd be something about him – but not a word."

Ted pulled the paper open to the continuation on page 7. "No, wait, here's something. 'In response to questions about the couple's four-year-old son, Draco, who was not found in a search of the family's home, Mrs. Malfoy would say only that she had provided for him. Considering the number and nature of the crimes to which this same woman had only minutes before confessed, only the worst can be feared.' "

"No," Andromeda breathed. "No. Not even Narcissa would do that. Bella... maybe. But this isn't Bella. It's Narcy. She wouldn't kill her own child."

"I'll take your word for it, sweetheart, I don't know either of them." Ted poured himself a cup of coffee. "They wouldn't have anything to do with the likes of me. I'm sorry about this, but don't forget, you did promise to take Dora shopping for Hogwarts today."

"Oh, that's right... damn it... and she's not going to take no for an answer, is she?"

“Not likely. Not that stubborn little girl of ours. Not after you promised, and took off work specially...”

Andromeda sighed. “All right. I’ll go get dressed.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come along?” Aletha asked Sirius as Remus and Danger marshaled the three older children for their shopping trip to Diagon Alley.

“Nah, I’ve had an idea ambush me, and I want to get it written down before it gets away.”

“Sirius Black, romance writer. If The Quibbler ever got word of that...”

“They’d refuse to publish it, because it was too impossible?”

“Something like that. All right, I’ll see you when we get back.”

I do love my job. If I’m caught up on my work – which I am – it’s almost never a bother to get a day off... but I’ll pay for it tomorrow, my desk will be full...

Oh well. Time to play “Witch-Auntie Letha takes the Muggle parents and their magical children around Diagon Alley”.

Nymphadora Tonks raced along the sidewalk, trailing her dull gray school tie behind her, thinking of the day when the Sorting Hat would shout out “GRYFFINDOR!” and it would magically turn red and gold striped as the table of Gryffindors cheered for their newest member...

Not looking where she was going, she tripped and fell full-length onto the sidewalk. Or rather, she would have fallen if a nearby man hadn’t caught her. “Are you all right, miss?” he asked her, helping her regain her balance.

“Dora!” Her mother caught up with her. “Thank you, sir – Dora, did you hurt yourself?”

“Mum!” Dora protested as her mother started to dust her off. “I’m fine, I just tripped – ”

“So I guess she never grew out of it, after all,” said one of the women with the man. “How are you, Andromeda?”

“Aletha Freeman! Good heavens, I haven’t seen you in years!”

Dora rolled her eyes. This was going to take a while, she knew from experience. Her mother was hugging the woman and exclaiming over the baby girl she was carrying in a backpack, and they were both talking at a great rate, and the man and the other woman with him were being introduced as “John and Kelly White, neighbors of mine, their twins are magical, Kelly was a childhood friend of mine...”

Twins? Looks like triplets to me...

“Twins? You have three here...”

Mr. White laughed. “This is Reggie,” he said, tapping one of the boys gently on the head. “He’s a cousin – Kelly’s sister’s boy.” He lowered his voice. “His parents died in a car accident – it happened quite recently, so he’s just come to us lately.”

“Oh, dear...”

“He’s a bit shy because of it,” Mrs. White confided, “and we’re trying to get him used to people gently – thus, a Thursday morning for shopping, it’s not nearly as crowded as the afternoons, or, heaven forbid, a weekend.”

“A good idea – Letha, have you seen the paper yet today?”

“The Prophet? Yes, I get it delivered, and that was quite a headline this morning.”

“Did you read the whole article?”

“Most of it, why?”

“I’m worried – ” Her mother leaned a bit closer to Ms. Freeman. “Worried about Draco.”

Reggie jumped a little, looking at her mother with something like fear. “We’ll be in Madam Malkin’s, Letha,” Mrs. White said quickly. “Come on, children, this way.”

“Dora, shoo,” her mother said. “But don’t go far.”

“ Yes, Mum.” Dora trotted around the nearest corner, leaned casually against the wall, and ever so carefully reshaped her ears for maximum hearing potential.

“Draco? Narcissa’s son?”

“Yes – they claim they can’t find him, and Narcissa said she’d ‘provided for him’. Letha, do you think that means what I think it means?”

“That she’s killed him? No, I don’t think so. Andy, she probably just sent him to live with a cousin or something – your family’s enormous, you’re related to three-quarters of the pure-bloods in Britain. She might even have sent him overseas somewhere. He’s probably just fine.”

“But there’s no way to be sure. Letha, I – I just feel so betrayed. I mean, we didn’t like each other, we almost never spoke, but she was still my sister! Couldn’t she at least have let me know what she did with her child? Even if she didn’t think I’d be able to raise him right, couldn’t she at least have told me?”

The sadness and worry in her mother’s voice surprised Dora. I never knew she cared that much about her sisters. She never mentions them, because they don’t acknowledge her – we pretty much don’t exist to one another...

“Andy...”

“You know something. Tell me.”

A pause. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I swore I wouldn’t.”

“Tell me this much, Aletha Freeman, or I will curse you to America and back, I don’t care what you swore. Is my sister’s son dead?”

Another pause, longer this time. “No.”

“Thank God,” her mother said, barely audible. “And thank you, Letha. I won’t ask you how you know.”

The other woman chuckled. “Wise decision. It’s a very long story, and you probably wouldn’t believe most of it.”

“You’ll have to try me sometime.”

“Sometime. Not today.”

“All right. I’ll see you around, I hope?”

“Probably.”

Dora quickly changed her ears back to normal and started mooning over her tie again. With any luck, her mother would think she’d been doing that the entire time.

Her mother came around the corner and stopped short. “How much did you hear?” she said crisply.

Dora shrugged. “Some.”

“You are not allowed to tell anyone. Ever. Understand?”

“Yes, Mum.”

“Good. Come on, we need to get to Flourish and Blotts.”

The woman who had spoken to Lucius Malfoy the night before was now in colloquy with a different sort of being.

“Crozer Street, in London. The house is number 71. Seek him there. If you find him...” She paused for thought. Would it be allowable?

She decided that it would. Black’s demise could only benefit the general wizarding public, and that would mean more popularity for her master.

“If you find him there, you may Kiss him. Do you understand?”

The black hood moved up and down, solemnly.

“Very well. You are dismissed.”

As the creature left the room, her mood of glee returned. She, and she alone, would be responsible for the ending of the two-year reign of terror posed by the escape of Sirius Black. But she would not take the glory for herself, of course. Everything she did, was done for one purpose and one alone – to further the career of Cornelius Fudge, and her own through his. Nothing else mattered.

Well, except having a little fun along the way.

Sirius paused in his typing, flexing his fingers. His idea, for once, was behaving itself, its portions queuing up neatly and allowing him to set them down in understandable sentences rather than insisting on all being heard at once so that he had to jot down fragments as they came clear.

Maybe I’m getting better at this.

He frowned at a slight sound. Was that the door?

“Hello? Anyone there?”

No answer.

I must have imagined it.

He returned to typing, but shivered slightly as a wave of unreasonable chill swept over him.

That's odd. It's the middle of July, the dog days – no pun intended – so it's nice and warm out. I shouldn't be cold.

He looked at the typewriter, oddly averse to continuing any farther with his work.

Why does it matter? It's just words on a page, no one really cares about it...

He shivered again.

Something is wrong here.

He turned around.

There was a shadow on the wall of the hallway. And whatever was casting it was very tall, and wearing a hooded cloak...

And now he could hear the breathing, rattling in its throat. The harsh breathing of something that hated life, all life, even its own, and would gladly feed on it...

Sirius' own breath seized up, and he fumbled for his wand.

How the bloody hell did they find me?

“Expecto Patronum!”

Aletha shivered a little. “You all right?” Danger asked her as Meghan threw her rattle over the side of her high chair for Draco to pick up, a game both children were enjoying.

“Fine. Just... cold for a second. Don’t know why.”

Sirius’ first try was not impressive, producing only a few wisps of silver mist. Concentrate. Concentrate. A good memory, a happy memory...

His eye fell on his wedding band. The day we got married. No, even better – the day Meghan was born.

He thought as hard as he could of that day – Letha almost falling out of the fireplace, the tense ride to the hospital, the hours of her labor, and then the astounding, intense joy when the doctor had announced that they had a daughter...

“Expecto Patronum!”

This Patronus was better, much better – there was a lot more mist, and it had something resembling a shape – a dog, of course, he knew that already. But that would only hold the dementor off. To chase it away, he needed a truly corporeal Patronus.

And I’m not sure I can produce one...

No. No negative thoughts.

But it was too late. His Patronus dimmed, and the dementor advanced again.

No, no, go away... come on, Sirius, get it together!

But the darkness was closing around him, he could distantly hear a dull thud, the sound of his cell door slamming shut –

“Someone help me,” he whispered, not even aware he’d spoken.

His wedding ring chilled on his finger.
Aletha gasped. “My ring!”

“What about it?” Remus asked, startled by her urgency.

“Feel it. It’s... cold.” She looked from one to the other of her friends. “Something’s wrong. I’m going home.” She stood up and Disapparated.

The children exchanged bewildered looks. “We going home too?” Harry asked.

“Maybe,” Remus said. “For right now, everyone stay where you are.”

I’ll stay with them if you want to go...

Let’s give it a minute. If Letha comes back laughing at herself, we’ll know it was a false alarm. If not...

Yes. Danger shivered a bit herself. Aletha arrived in the middle of her front room and shuddered.

It’s cold in here. Too cold.

And too quiet.

“Sirius?”

No answer.

He said he was going to work on a story. So he would have been in his typing room, which used to be my guest bedroom...

She hurried up the stairs, more worried than ever when she saw the door standing open. He should have heard me, he should have answered by now...

“Sirius!” She was in the doorway even as she called –

In one awful instant, she understood everything.

No, oh God no...

The dementor was just beginning to pry Sirius' mouth open, preparing to Kiss him –

Over my dead body!

“Expecto Patronum!” Aletha screamed, wand pointed straight at the foul thing. A blast of silver shot from it and shielded Sirius, forcing the dementor upright and herding it back.

She ran to him and stood between him and it. “Begone, if you be not deathless!” she hissed. “For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him.” She closed her eyes for an instant and brought up the memory of the night she and Sirius had been reunited, her undiluted joy at having the love of her life in her arms again...

“Expecto Patronum,” she said calmly, and a great silver – something – sprang from her wand. It had four legs, but also wings, and it galloped at the dementor and struck it full in the face with its front hooves –

The dementor fell back, and glided swiftly out of the room. Aletha stepped into the doorway and urged on her Patronus – the winged horse chased the dementor down the stairs and out of the front door, which it left open behind it.

Fine. I'll close it later. Thank God, all the neighbors are Muggles, they won't see it.

A groan from behind her brought her back to more important matters.

Sirius!

She ran to his side. “Sirius, wake up. Are you all right?”

“Yes.” The whispered word didn't sound all right, but it reassured her on the important point.

He still has his soul. He's still with me.

Nothing is more important than that.

She embraced him, shaking herself now that it was over. "It's gone," she whispered. "It's gone. It won't come back. You're safe now."

"Letha?" Sirius opened his eyes and focused on her. The sheer terror in them was fast being replaced by relief and puzzlement. "What are you doing home?"

"I had to come. I – my wedding ring. It got cold, here, feel it – " She paused, confused. "It's normal again. But it got freezing cold, and I knew, I knew something was wrong, and – I came."

"Damn good thing you did." Sirius pulled himself up to sitting and returned her hug, holding on to her tightly. "I like my soul where it is."

His flippant words could not disguise a lingering trace of fear – trace of fear? If this was me, I'd still be screaming in terror! He's incredible.

But, of course, I knew that... that's part of the reason I married him...

The crack of an Apparation sounded through the house. "Letha?" Remus called. "Sirius?"

"Upstairs!" Aletha called back. "Everything's all right now – but it wasn't when I got here."

Sirius snorted. "Understatement of the year, that."

"What happened?" Remus appeared in the doorway, wand out and ready.

"Dementor," Sirius said succinctly. "If Letha had been ten seconds later, I'd be down one soul."

Remus expressed his feelings with several short words, including one Aletha didn't know and made a mental note to look up. "Is it gone?" he finished.

“Yes, my Patronus chased it out – I never got a corporeal one before, it was a winged horse – damn, I’m babbling, I’m sorry...”

“Don’t be. It’s fine. Winged horse, that sounds right for you...” Remus shook his head. “Hold on, I’m being shouted at.” His eyes went unfocused in the way they often did when he and Danger were speaking silently, and Aletha took the opportunity to have a good look and see if something she’d half-noticed quite a while ago was true...

Sure enough. The clear blue of Remus’ eyes was slowly being stained with brown, the same warm brown she saw every time she looked at Danger – and I would bet Danger’s are going blue at the same time. That’s a bit creepy...

“I should get back,” Remus said abruptly, coming out of his half-trance. “The children are taking advantage of the reduced odds. We’ve got just about everything we need, anyway, I think it’s time to bring them home...”

“Are you sure it’s safe?” Sirius said sharply. “Those children do not come in this house if there’s the least possibility that thing is coming back.”

“The only reason it would come here is if it was sent, Sirius.” Remus sighed. “Which opens a whole new can of flobberworms. Who sent it, and why, and did they know you were here, or were they only guessing? We don’t know – we can’t know – but it’s a distinct possibility that Lucius Malfoy got someone to believe him before they put him away, and that someone sent the dementor to check out the situation.”

“Who sends a dementor to check out a situation?” Aletha objected. “They don’t even talk, they’re smart enough to take orders and not much more – whoever sent that thing knew Sirius was here!”

“So complain,” Sirius said, standing up. “File a formal complaint about it coming into your house. And if anyone comes looking for me, I lick their hands and look adorable, and you remind the world that you haven’t seen me for years and you couldn’t care less.”

“True – they haven’t got anything plausible on me, so they have no grounds to use any kind of verification, potion or spell. They’ll have to take me at my word.” Aletha chuckled, realizing the irony of the wizarding law in this instance sheltering the law-breakers. “And if the thing comes back, we have three fully qualified wand-users in the house. We should be fine.”

I hope.

Dumbledore’s letter arrived soon after Danger and the children returned home, and Danger replied promptly, with her usual good humor, enclosing the wizarding equivalent of a Polaroid. Remus insisted on adding a postscript, but Sirius insisted that nothing be said about the dementor. They had a brief conversation in hand signals, which ended with Remus capitulating, and the letter was sent on its way by return owl.

After their celebration for Draco’s birthday was over, Aletha went to the Ministry to file her complaint. Harry and Neenie hauled Draco upstairs to initiate him into something or other to do with being a cub – the adults didn’t really know everything that went on with the cubs, and that was fine, since the reverse was certainly true. Sirius and Remus sat at the kitchen table, each with a pile of paperwork – Remus doing the family finances, Sirius revising his latest work – while Meghan made loud noises under the table, and Danger did the dishes and ruminated.

Last night, an evil wizard was planning to experiment on us. This morning, a freakish thing tried to suck out my Pack-brother’s soul. And now, here we are, acting as if nothing out of the ordinary happened.

Of course, for us, nothing really did...

Andromeda stepped out of her fireplace and sneezed. I hope that’s everything. Merlin, Dora’s so excited about Hogwarts – I hope we can survive the last month or so until she leaves...

A white envelope lay on the table. Must have come while we were out.

“Mum, you’ve had an owl.” Dora picked it up. “Who’s it from?”

“Let me see.” Andromeda took the envelope from her daughter, looked at the name written on the outside – and froze.

I know that handwriting. Oh, I know that handwriting. So perfectly precise, so pointed and narrow...

“Muuuum,” Dora wheedled.

“Dora, go to your room,” Andromeda said distantly. “You’re in no trouble – just go.”

Dora looked at her for a second, then went. Andromeda sat down in her husband’s big armchair, smelling the faint odor of his soap and aftershave, and wishing he was there...

Nonsense. Are you a witch or not? Open the letter and read it!

She did what the emphatic voice in her head told her, while noting that it had much the sound of Professor Minerva McGonagall...

26 July 1984

Dear Andromeda,

I hope that you will not destroy this letter, for there is much I wish to say to you. First, I owe you an apology. I have wronged you by not communicating with you all these years. Your choice of a husband, however much I may disagree with it, does not change the fact that you are my sister. Please forgive me.

By now I’m sure the news has reached you of what I have done. If not, I suggest you seek a copy of today’s Daily Prophet before reading any further. Suffice it to say, I have come to my senses at last. My husband is a fool, and it is high time his crimes were punished as they deserve. As for myself – Andromeda, I have taken the coward’s way out. By tomorrow morning, I shall be dead. I have told no one but you, and you may judge me as you wish. You have earned that right.

I hope that you retain enough sisterly feeling for me to wonder what has become of my son Draco. He is safe, and in good hands, hands that you would consider good, I daresay, as well as myself. A cousin of ours and his family have taken my son in, and will raise him as one of their own. I cannot name the man, for various reasons, one of them being that my son will be safest from retribution by others of my former fellowship if no one knows where he is.

Andromeda, I cannot pretend that I was a good sister to you. I was not. I cannot pretend either that I was a good mother to my son, for I was not. But I feel I have at last taken a step in the right direction, by giving Draco a home and a family, when he would have known none otherwise. Please do not be offended that I did not send him to you, but you have only one child, and she begins formal schooling in the autumn. I did not wish to burden you with another child at this point in your life.

Please also believe that your husband had nothing to do with my decision. The family raising my son includes all types of bloodline that we recognize, from Muggle to pureblood, and they make no distinctions. It is my hope that by the time my son reaches adulthood, neither will he.

I have taken one further step of which I hope you approve. My son is no longer a Malfoy – he has taken our name, making him Draco Regulus Black. I cannot say that I am not proud that my son will carry on the noble name to which I was born, for I am. But I am ashamed of myself. My actions have smirched our name, Andromeda – I see that now. It is wizards and witches like myself and our sister Bellatrix who have made the house of Black fall. Only those like you, and our cousin who now raises my son, keep it alive.

If, my sister, by some miracle you wish to honor my memory, I ask that you do it in this manner – tell your daughter my story. Tell her about a foolish woman who denied love, who renounced love, and who ran from love, until at last love conquered her with the hands of a child. Tell her about a woman who perhaps loved not too well but wisely, and tell her what became of that love – how a man the world

considered upright was exposed for the evil fool he is, and a little boy was given a chance at life he would never have otherwise had.

I bid you farewell, Andromeda. If there is anything beyond this life, I surely deserve a worse fate than you, so I hold out little hope of seeing you again. Please believe, though, that I die content. I have saved my son and ruined my husband. My work is done.

Your sister,

Narcissa

A postscript was scrawled across the bottom, obviously a last-minute addition, done in haste.

Perhaps plant a flower for me...

Andromeda placed the letter gently on the end table beside the chair, drew her knees up to her chest, and began, slowly, painfully, to cry. Under cover of darkness, Patroclus Nott slipped into the Malfoy manor, carefully avoiding the Auror guard posted at the front entrance.

Drawing room floor. I just hope I can remember how to work the catch...

Luckily, his hands remembered it, though his mind was hazy on the details, it having been shown to him quite a long time ago.

I was new to the Dark then... Lucius seemed a million miles above me...

And now he has fallen. And it is up to me to take his place.

If I can keep it.

He began to remove items from the secret hiding place, bottles of potions, scrolls and books, and load them into a bag.

How odd. I could have sworn he always kept some time-delay poison here. Checking for observers, he lit his wand and peered into the opening. Yes, he did – I can see where it was. Someone took it.

He wondered for a moment, then shrugged. Not my problem.

Cradling the bag in his arms to keep its precious contents from clinking and betraying him, he slipped back out, the Aurors none the wiser.

And they never need to be. No one ever knew about that hiding place except Malfoys – Lucius only told me because the Dark Lord told him to.

An owl tapped on a window of the Den.

“It’s from Dumbledore,” Aletha announced. “He’s invited us to tea, at Hogwarts. On Sunday. Anyone have any previous engagements?”

“Oh, I’ll disappoint the Minister if I must,” Sirius said, batting his eyelashes outrageously. Remus punched him in the arm, and Danger rolled her eyes.

Sandwiched between two other children, the former heir to the house of Malfoy slept soundly, the emptiness inside him filled for the first time in his life.

Thursday, 26 July 1984 might not be noted in the history books, except in passing, but it really was a very important day, for quite a lot of reasons...

(A/N: One of them very personal. Any guesses?

So, who was that mysterious woman, anyway? The one who sent the dementor after Sirius? Guesses? (Shouldn’t be that hard!) Also, who can tell me the source of Aletha’s defiance of the dementor?

Love and hugs to all!)

Chapter 23: Tea with the Headmaster

“Mum? Don’t you have to go in tonight?”

Andromeda, still curled in her husband’s armchair trying not to think of her sister, gasped. She had almost forgotten that taking the day off meant she’d have to work the night shift. “Oh Merlin, that’s right – thank you, sweetheart, you’re a lifesaver.”

Dora came carefully across the room, only tripping once, and hugged her. “Are you all right?”

“I will be, sweetie. Thank you. But I do have to get going now...”

One thing being a Healer taught you was discipline. Whatever was happening in your personal life could absolutely not be allowed to interfere with giving your patients the best possible care. So Andromeda pushed all her sorrow and confusion and worry to the back of her mind and made rounds with the best smile she could.

Right until a young wizard, wearing the uniform of an Auror-trainee, came stumbling out of the fireplace in the St. Mungo’s lobby while she was waiting at the on-call booth. “Emergency,” he gasped out. “We need a Healer right away – someone’s dying – ”

Andromeda snatched her kit and followed the boy back through the fire almost without hearing the destination he called out. He led her down a series of dark corridors, lined with identical doors, all barred –

Barred?

And it wasn’t until he stopped in front of one of them that she realized what was going on, and who the patient was that she had been called to tend...

“There’s nothing I can do,” she said flatly, turning quickly away.

“How can you know that?” the Auror in charge, a woman with blond hair going silver, demanded. “At least try.” She waved her wand, opening the door of the cell.

Andromeda forced her emotion down and stepped in. But it wasn't easy to look at that face, so still, so white, and not remember...

No, it was impossible. Andromeda put her wand away and took the patient's hand, as she had done long ago, when she was still just tomboy Andy, and the patient was just her annoying little tagalong sister Narcy...

"Andy?"

At first she thought she'd imagined the whisper, but then she saw that Narcissa's eyes had opened, and were fixed on her.

"Yeah. It's me." She tried to smile. "Hi, Narcy."

"I'm... going. Aren't I."

"I thought that was what you wanted."

"It is." Narcissa's free hand fluttered up for a second, then fell back to the mattress beside her. "Will you... do something for me?"

"Anything." To make up for everything I should have done when we were girls... I'm sorry I told you to go away so often, you turned to Bella instead, and this is what came of it...

"My ring. My... heirloom ring. Take it."

"All right." Andromeda gently pulled the ring from her sister's finger. She herself wore the mate to it, of course, and she assumed the third had either been confiscated or was with their oldest sister, in Azkaban... "Do you want me to do something special with it?"

"Yes. Draco. Give it... to him. When you see him again. Or if you ever... find out where he is. They said... they would teach him... my name..." A pause, a long, rattling breath. "I want him... to have something... of mine..."

“I will,” Andromeda promised, stroking Narcissa’s face. “Hush now, go to sleep. I love you.”

Narcissa’s face blossomed into a childlike smile. “Love... you...” Her eyes closed.

Andromeda clamped down on herself with all of her Healer’s control. There would be a time for tears.

She rose and faced the Aurors. The woman looked considering, the boy just looked amazed.

“She was my sister,” she said in her most neutral tone. “She wrote to me today, telling me that she had poisoned herself. That was how I knew I could do nothing.”

“My condolences,” the woman said quietly, opening the cell door for her.

“Thank you.” Schooling herself to uprightness and steady steps, Andromeda began to walk back down the hall.

She got as far as the next cell.

The smug smile on its occupant’s face pierced everything she had.

With a strangled oath, she drew her wand and Stunned the man, consciously restraining herself from killing him instead, or inflicting some kind of lasting damage.

“And thank you,” the Auror said from behind her, with a short, grim laugh. “I’ve been wanting to do that for the last three hours.”

“Oh, you’re quite welcome,” Andromeda said, feeling her tension about to release itself in hysterical laughter. “I... think I need to get back, can you show me out?”

“Go on, boy, show Healer Tonks the exit,” said the Auror. “Azkaban’s too good for this one,” she added under her breath, but Andromeda heard her.

“I’ll second that,” she answered venomously, and quickly followed the trainee, who now seemed afraid that she might hex him at any moment.

I need to go home. And cry for about an hour. And have my husband hold me, and tell me the world hasn’t all gone mad.

But first I have to finish my shift.

Duty comes first, after all.

She squared her shoulders and climbed into the fireplace.

“St. Mungo’s Hospital!”

Harry woke up early on Sunday morning. And when Harry woke up early, so did everyone else in the house.

We have got to teach him the meaning of “quiet”, Remus said with a groan.

Best of luck. Danger rolled over and checked the clock. Ack. 7:15. There are days I wish I had never got into any of this...

Harry burst into their bedroom. “We going to Hogwarts t’day!”

“That’s right, Harry. Hogwarts today,” Remus said, sitting up to receive the armful of wiggly, excited almost-four-year-old. “But not until this afternoon. You’re going to wake everybody up if you keep yelling.”

“Going to?” Sirius asked from the door with a yawn. “Try did.”

“Good morning to you too.”

“Why we going to Hogwarts?” Draco asked. He was in one of his timid moods, where he seemed afraid of everyone and everything. These alternated with his “king-of-the-universe” moods, in which he demanded impossible things and called people names. Both were rather hard to take. But every now and again, a third Draco looked out of his eyes, this one neither painfully shy nor arrogant but energetic and eager to learn, and Danger suspected the longer he was treated kindly, the more this third Draco would emerge.

“ We’re going to have tea with the Headmaster, Professor Dumbledore,” Aletha said, as Sirius came into the bedroom and sat on the foot of the bed, Neenie and Draco following him in. “He wants to meet you and talk with us. And he’ll have biscuits for you. But we’re not going until four o’clock, so there’s no reason to be up now, Harry.” She planted her hands on her hips and made a face at the boy, who made one right back.

“Well, as long as we are all up, who wants breakfast?” Danger asked, swinging her legs out of bed. Breakfast was followed by some time in the back yard. “Go get dirty,” Remus told the children, opening the door for them. “You’re having baths after lunch.”

Harry careened out the door and tore around the house once, yelling for sheer joy. Neenie and Draco looked at one another with identical expressions of amused tolerance before meandering out themselves. Aletha followed them out, dressed in gardening clothes, with Meghan behind her, one hand on Padfoot’s back for balance (walking still being a relatively new skill to her).

It wasn’t long before the sun and the joyous yells from the small grassy area drew Remus outside as well. The children and Sirius were kicking around a big, inflated ball, about as tall as Meghan was, which didn’t seem to bother her at all as she chased it and threw herself at it. Occasionally, one of them would break off to see if Aletha had turned up any worms. Worms were a fascination of all four children, neither of the girls having developed the aversion to them supposedly common to their sex.

After a while, Harry went to relax in the shade. Remus could see him, lying on his stomach, heels in the air, looking at something in the grass in front of him –

And talking to it –

As he got closer to Harry, he could hear part of what the boy was saying. Hear, but not understand. Harry was, indeed, a Parselmouth. And he was apparently having a spirited conversation with the small garden snake in the grass in front of him.

Wonderful. Another thing for the tell-absolutely-no-one-about-this list. Right up there with his real name and that scar on his forehead.

If he reaches the age of 11 even close to normal, it will be a miracle.

“Hi, Moony. You wanna talk to Sisseehh with me?”

“Is that the snake’s name, Harry?”

Harry nodded. “She never met anybody who could talk snake b’fore. Can you talk snake, Moony?”

“No, Harry. Almost nobody can talk snake. I think you’re probably the only one. And it scares some people, so it has to be a den-secret. All right?”

“All right. Can Sisseehh live in the Den?”

Remus tried to imagine Danger and Aletha’s reaction to a pet snake.

I somehow doubt they’d be enraptured by the idea...

“Why don’t you ask her if she wants to live indoors, Harry?”

Harry turned back to the snake and hissed at it – at her – for a moment. The response was inaudible to Remus, but Harry frowned a little. “She says no, she likes outside. But she’ll stay ‘round now she

knows I live here, and we can talk lots and lots. She knows stories to tell me!”

“Is she going to tell you one now?”

“Yeah.”

“All right, I’ll let you two talk. We’ll call you in when it’s time for lunch.”

“OK.” Harry turned back to the snake, listening intently.

And a new high on the surreal-o-meter has been reached.

Oh, you have one too?

Yes, when did yours start registering?

Right about the time I fell in love with a werewolf.

Touché. It’s official, Harry’s a Parselmouth. He’s making friends with a snake as we speak.

Is it poisonous?

No. And “it” happens to be a she, according to our little native speaker.

All right, is she going to come in the house?

No.

Then fine. As long as no one sees him. Right?

Right.

I hope.

After lunch was lesson time for the three older children. Draco was just beginning to sound out words, so Harry and Neenie both beat

him out in reading, but he showed talent for mathematics. Danger found herself enjoying her role as teacher quite a bit.

Maybe I would have made a good primary teacher. If the past three years had never happened, that is.

And that's something I'm not willing to wish. Not by a long shot.

Draco's reward for finishing his work was some time with Aletha in the music room, where she taught him some of the simpler songs the other children already knew. Neenie and Harry's was to have Sirius read a story to them, something they adored. Danger found herself making excuses to stay in the room while he read to them – she liked to listen herself, she admitted finally.

Sirius does read well. Elocution lessons, he says, one of those things pureblood children get tutored in once they get old enough to pay attention. Poor Draco – he would have gone straight from hardly ever seeing a human being to lessons six hours a day. It's a wonder any of the purebloods survive.

Baths for all the children were organized after lessons were over. Neenie shared a tub with Meghan, as they had done since before Meghan could sit up, when Neenie had cradled the littler girl in her arms so that the supervising adult could get her washed. Harry and Draco took their turns in the other bathroom, and then it was time to get dressed and ready for the big outing.

"Don' wanna wear a dress," Neenie complained, wiggling away from Aletha's hands.

"Don't you want to look pretty?"

"No. I'm a warrior. Warriors don't look pretty."

"Oh, yes, they do. You look at me. Do I look pretty?"

"Yeah," Hermione admitted.

Thank heaven, she never gets totally irrational the way Harry does sometimes.

“Well, I’m a warrior. I fought a terrible beast on Thursday and chased him away from our Den. So you see, warriors can look pretty.”

Hermione cast a doubtful look at the dress, but allowed herself to be helped into it.

“But it’s only girl warriors who get to look pretty,” Aletha confided as she gently combed Hermione’s hair. “Boy warriors have to look handsome. And I think that’s harder.”

Neenie giggled. “Harry’n’Draco gonna look han’some?”

“I hope so,” Aletha said. “Where are your good shoes?”

“B’hind the bureau.”

“What are they doing there? No, never mind, don’t tell me, I don’t want to know. Just go get them.”

Neenie sped out of the bathroom and down the hall to the cubs’ room, where the boys were dressing. A two-part screech of outraged little-boy modesty arose, and Aletha had to muffle her face in a nearby bath towel to keep from laughing out loud.

Ah, how I love my Pack.

Sirius was a bit nervous as the time for leaving approached. He hadn’t left the Den undisguised in... well, ever.

But if we can’t trust Dumbledore, who can we trust? And it’s not as if I haven’t been to his office before... for one reason or another.

As Aletha’s mantel clock ticked over to show four o’clock, he lifted Harry up and entered the green flames with (he hoped) no outward signs of trepidation. “Headmaster’s office, Hogwarts,” he said, and held Harry close as they spun through the Floo connection.

Dumbledore was expecting them. The usually empty floor space of his office was filled with a large round table, with one high chair and eight regular chairs set up, three of them with booster seats. The man himself turned from doing something esoteric to the teapot with genuine welcome on his face. "Sirius, what a pleasure to see you again, under less tense circumstances than the last time."

"Agreed," Sirius said, shaking Dumbledore's extended hand. "Harry, this is Professor Dumbledore. Say hello."

"Hi," Harry said, sticking out his own hand as Sirius put him down. "You got a long beard."

"Indeed I do," Dumbledore said, shaking hands with Harry, his eyes twinkling. "I seem to recall," he said to Sirius, "a certain young man whose first audible comment upon arrival in the Great Hall in his first year was 'Great Merlin, his beard's enormous!' "

Sirius laughed aloud as Aletha stepped from the fireplace with Meghan. "Only you would remember that this long, Headmaster."

Danger, who came next, had to be introduced (dream meetings didn't count), as did Neenie, but the real moment of truth came when Remus exited the fire, holding Draco in his arms.

"Hello, Draco. I am Professor Dumbledore." Probably wisely, Dumbledore stayed a short distance away from the boy, letting him set the pace.

Draco's shoulders went back and his chin went up.

Oh, damn it, he's into one of his arrogant moods again...

"My father says you an old coot," Draco announced.

"He may be right," said Dumbledore gravely.

Draco seemed to have been expecting a different reaction. He looked curiously at Dumbledore, his posture returning to normal. "What's a coot?" he said finally.

Remus and Danger carefully avoided looking at one another, the way they did when they were talking privately. Probably laughing, instead of talking, Sirius thought. He wished he had an outlet like that – he was just stuck trying not to laugh at his newest son.

"It's not a polite word, Draco," Aletha said quietly. "You're not in any trouble, but it's not a word to use about someone else. All right?"

Draco nodded, looking a little shamefaced, having reverted to his timid mode.

"Children," Sirius said, getting attention from Draco and Neenie. Harry was investigating the table, and the refreshments on it. "Harry." The boy jumped and turned around guiltily. "Time to listen. We'll have tea in a minute." He nodded to Remus.

"Listen carefully, cubs," Remus said, subtly loading his tone with listen-to-me-and-obey overtones, as he was so good at doing. "Professor Dumbledore is our Pack-friend, which means he is allowed to know our den-secrets. This office is another Den for us. In here, it is safe to use your in-den names and to wear your real faces. The moment you go past that door – " He pointed it out. "You are out-of-den, and you need to use out-of-den names and not talk about den-secrets. Understand?"

"Unnerstan'," Hermione said, as Harry and Draco gave nods.

"Good." Remus turned to Dumbledore. "Your party," he said.

Dumbledore smiled. "So it is. Come, let us have tea. And perhaps we can discuss the exact method by which the son of Lucius Malfoy came into your hands."

"Yes, perhaps we can," Sirius said, pulling out a chair for Aletha. "And perhaps we can also discuss getting some kind of warding on

that house so that you know if something happens to all of us. Which it did, Wednesday night.”

“Lucius Malfoy caught on to us somehow,” Aletha picked up the story. “He got into the Den, Stunned us all, and took us to his manor. He had various uncouth things planned for us which I will not spoil a pleasant meal by relating. Suffice it to say, he deserves everything he’s getting.”

“Narcissa made a deal with us,” Sirius took over again. “Our freedom, and Lucius’ removal from the picture, if we would take Draco and raise him with Harry and Hermione.”

“She poisoned herself,” Danger said quietly. “She didn’t ever want Draco to have divided loyalties. She even asked us not to teach him about her.”

“She asked. And you responded?”

“We said no,” said Remus. “Draco deserves to know his mother’s name, and what she did for him, the same way that Harry does. And they will. As long as we live.”

“Which may not be much longer, if another dementor comes calling,” growled Sirius.

“Yes, I did get word of that,” Dumbledore said. “Through the stories about your rampage through the DMLE, Aletha. Is it true you threw a chair over three cubicles?”

“A chair? No, it was a bloody great form they wanted me to fill out! A chair, honestly... This horrid little woman, looked like a toad, with this awful saccharine voice, kept insisting that ‘you must have been mistaken, dear, there’s simply no way a dementor could have been in your house’, until I wanted to step on her...”

“Dolores Umbridge,” Dumbledore said, his voice becoming suddenly alert. “You spoke with Dolores Umbridge?”

“Yes, I think that was her name. Why does it matter?”

“Because Dolores Umbridge has no business in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” Dumbledore said crisply. “She works directly for Cornelius Fudge. She was his candidate for the position you now hold, Aletha.”

“Ick. I can see why you wouldn’t want her around, Headmaster. After the fourth time she told me I must have been wrong, I snatched the form out of her hand, crumpled it up in front of her face, threw it over her head, and said, ‘Well, if it wasn’t a dementor, it was a damn good imitation, since the only thing it responded to was a Patronus Charm, and it got itself out of the house right smart when I did one of those. I have a one-year-old daughter, Madam, and I want to be able to put her to sleep without worrying about having her soul sucked out. If you’re not going to listen to me, I’m taking this to the Daily Prophet.’ And I did.”

“Which explains the next morning’s headline,” Dumbledore said, half-turning and Summoning a newspaper from his desk. The front page proclaimed:

DEMENTOR ATTACK!

Private home invaded, Ministry worker claims

Are your children safe? Ministry declines comment

“With this, along with the other recent news,” Dumbledore glanced at Draco, whose attention was riveted on his ginger snaps, “there are likely to be elections in the near future. I will, of course, be as apolitical as possible. It would be unscrupulous of me to do anything to influence the voters’ choice. For instance, I would never dream of making public the fact that Cornelius Fudge sleeps in pajamas with feet attached.”

Sirius choked on the biscuit he was eating. No. No way. He did not just...

“And I would certainly not tell such a fact to people noted for their pranking ability.”

Oh yes he did.

Danger sighed and closed her eyes, an expression of bliss sliding onto her face.

“Nor would I tell them that on the night of 2 August, the Minister’s private residence will be guarded by an Auror named Shackbolt, who, if he is given the proper reassurances, might allow himself to be overpowered. While denying later that he did any such thing, of course.”

“And you wouldn’t want those people to act on this information that you haven’t given them?” Remus asked, flashing a quick hand signal across the table.

“I don’t believe this.” Me either...

“No, of course not.”

“Then I think we understand each other,” Aletha said, her lips curving in an extremely satisfied smile.

“Quite so.” Dumbledore reached for the teapot. “More tea, anyone?” After they had finished tea, the Pack assumed their out-of-den identities and went down to visit Hagrid. As they came down the grand marble staircase, Danger suddenly stiffened. Remus – don’t say anything.

Why not?

I don’t know. A hunch. Just don’t.

“The Headmaster is very nice,” Danger said a bit inanely to Aletha.

“Oh, yes, isn’t he?” Letha answered, picking up her cue excellently. “So darling and so funny – I haven’t laughed so much in weeks.”

As I thought. No one I need or want to be concerned with.

The dark figure in the doorway to the stairs vanished with a billow of cloak, returning to his preferred haunts, below ground, where he could work uninterrupted by foolish students for another blissful month before the resumption of that tiresome thing known as the school year.

Hagrid was overjoyed to receive them in his house – Remus went through the Pack-friend ritual for the cubs again with Hagrid, naming his hut as “another Den” for them as well, and their behavior towards him soon reflected that.

“Never though’ I’d see th’ day,” he said, bouncing all three older cubs on his knee at once. “Son o’ James Potter, son o’ Lucius Malfoy – raised together. An’ raised right. They’ll be Gryffindors, mark me words.”

“We certainly hope so,” Aletha said, laughing. “And they’ll know not to be afraid of the big man who calls them off the train. You remember what I did when I saw you?”

“Not abou’ ter fergit, am I?” Hagrid guffawed. “Yeh almos’ ran over two o’ yer classmates before one o’ the purebloods told yeh who I was an’ all.”

“I never knew that,” Sirius said with interest, looking at his wife. “The things you learn when you go on an outing to Hogwarts.”

“Feetie pajamas,” Danger said very quietly.

“Pardon?” Hagrid said in confusion.

“Check the Prophet on 3 August, Hagrid,” Remus said with a wicked smile. “The Marauders are back.”

An owl was waiting impatiently on the window ledge when they got home. Aletha took the letter from it, and it flew off immediately.

“There’s something in here,” she said, feeling the envelope. “I think it’s a ring.”

She ripped the letter open and turned it over. A gold ring fell into her hand. "Sure enough. Let me see who it's from."

Sirius took the ring from her hand and looked at it. "It's from Andromeda," he said. Then he looked at it again. "No... I take that back. This is from Narcissa."

"It's from both of them." Aletha read the letter aloud.

Dear Aletha,

As you requested, I will not ask you any questions you can't answer. But in case you should ever happen to see my sister's son, would you please give him, or his guardians, this ring. It was Narcissa's, a family heirloom, and she wanted him to have something of herself. I would also appreciate occasionally hearing news of Draco, if that can be arranged. Whether it can or not, I will keep my silence.

Yours,

Andromeda Black Tonks

"How did she know what Narcissa wanted?" Sirius wondered aloud.

"The Healer," Aletha said quietly. "The Prophet article about Narcissa's death mentioned that a Healer couldn't do anything to save her. It must have been Andromeda."

"She had to watch her sister die?" Danger closed her eyes in sympathy. "God, how awful."

"We will send her news of Draco," Remus said. "Every few months. It's the least we can do."

On Harry's birthday, all four cubs received presents – gold chains to wear around their necks, each with one or two rings hanging from it. Sirius had retrieved his own heirloom ring, which had been placed in the Black family vault after his arrest, and Meghan now carried it.

“She’s the next generation of the house of Black, after all,” was his reasoning. “No reason for me to wear it, now that she’s here.”

“Not to mention you hate most of your family,” Aletha said, kicking him gently in the shin.

Draco bore his mother’s ring, of course, and Harry and Neenie each had two – their parents’ wedding bands. Danger had kept her parents’, and James’ and Lily’s had been given to Remus as the closest family friend available.

“This way, the ones who loved you will always be close to your heart,” Danger explained to the children. “You can wear them always, even in the bath – even when you go to bed. Because your parents’ love for you is always there, even though you can’t see it.”

“But you our parents now,” Neenie said in confusion.

“You can have more than one set of parents,” Danger said. “Look around you, silly girl – you have two sets as it is!”

“Don’ call me silly.” Neenie pouted.

“You know what happens to pouters,” Remus said, inching his hand across the table towards the girl. “They get...”

“Tickled!” shrieked the boys, and pounced on Neenie.

The party ended, as most parties did at the Den, in happy confusion. Cornelius Fudge awoke, wondering why he felt oddly chilly, and what all the whispering was about around him.

As he opened his eyes, the reason became horribly apparent. His bed had, somehow, been transported into the middle of the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic. His covers had been removed, except for one sheet, which had been emblazoned with the words:

FUDGE WEARS FEETIE PAJAMAS

Said sheet had been placed sideways across him, to show that he was, indeed, wearing the mentioned articles of clothing.

He had also, apparently, been Stuck to the bed. He certainly couldn't move. He had a horrible premonition that the sheet was Permanently Stuck to his favorite pajamas.

And the whispering noise was exactly that. People standing near his bed, staring and whispering. A lot of people.

The only thing which could make this worse would be...

From somewhere nearby, he heard the distinctive "poof" of a camera going off. He groaned and hid his head under the pillow.

This is the worst day of my life, and it hasn't even started yet.

Saturday 4 August 1984

CORNELIUS FUDGE RESIGNS

Staff leaves with ex-Minister; Vilias to take over in interim

By Rita Skeeter, Special Reporter

Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge had something less than a good week last week. First, the arrests of the Malfoys, whom the Minister expressed public confidence in at the time of their original trials. Secondly, the suspicious death of Narcissa Malfoy – was it suicide, as reported, the general public wondered, or something more sinister? But the final straw that broke this hippogriff's back was the by now infamous exposure of the Minister's choice of sleeping apparel by a person or persons unknown. This dreadful event has already gained Fudge the moniker "Feetie Fudge".

Fudge resigned today, citing "health concerns" as the cause. Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement Lars Vilias will take over the day-to-day concerns of government until new elections can be held. One Ministry insider, frothing with rage, told this reporter, "Mr. Fudge has been vilely defamed by this scandal, and I intend to see

justice done on whoever perpetrated it. They will not escape my wrath forever.”

“Oh, I’m so scared,” Sirius whined. “Save me, save me.”

“Cheers,” Remus said with a grin, lifting his glass. “To a prank successfully pulled.”

“To a corrupt idiot removed from office,” Aletha toasted.

“To Feetie Fudge,” said Danger with a very carefully straight face.

“Eurgh, wonder what that would taste like?” said Sirius.

The Pack fell apart laughing.

(A/N: I almost peed my pants when I came up with “Feetie Fudge”, so I thought my readers deserved fair warning...

Love and hugs, and all that good stuff, and happy Boxing Day, everyone!)

Chapter 24: Happy Ending

“One two three four five six seven,

“All good children go to heaven...”

It was a sunny August Saturday, and the Pack was at the park near the Den, playing. Draco was taking his turn at jumping the rope Aletha and Danger were turning, while Harry and Hermione waited impatiently. Remus helped Meghan throw a ball for Sirius to chase. Whether it went fifty feet or only two, the huge black dog bounded after it with the same enthusiasm, making Meghan clap her hands and laugh.

Draco missed his jump, and the rope tangled around his ankle. He quickly kicked free and jumped out. Harry took his place, and the game went on.

She waited in line, biting her lip anxiously. They'd got through the M's and N's, they were into the R's, she'd be up any minute now, and Professor McGonagall would say her awful name, but she could even live with that if it meant it was her turn...

“Tonks, Nymphadora.”

She gulped and walked forward, being extra careful not to trip. Delicately, she sat down, and the Hat fell onto her head.

“Well, well, daughter of Andromeda Black, are you? I remember her... bound and determined not to be a Slytherin, when I wouldn't have put her there in the first place, it was obvious she should be a Ravenclaw. You're pretty bright yourself, but oh, I see, you have your own ideas of your proper place... very well, I do try to satisfy all comers if I can... GRYFFINDOR!”

“Yes!” Tonks shot to her feet as the Gryffindor table cheered for her.

And promptly fell on her face.

Well, it was bound to happen sooner or later.

“Weasley, Charles,” Professor McGonagall read over the laughter. A red-haired boy sat confidently down as Tonks picked herself up and made for the table. The Hat took only a moment with him – he too was a “GRYFFINDOR!” Because of her fall, he and Tonks reached the table at about the same time. They looked at each other and laughed.

“Nymphadora, is it?” he said, sticking out his hand.

“No. Tonks. Please.”

“All right, Tonks it is. I’m Charlie.”

They shook.

The Pack went to den-sleeping for a while in early September when Draco had a series of nightmares. He wasn’t too keen to talk about them, but gentle questioning elicited the expected answers – he was trapped in the manor, and his father was chasing him and shouting at him, trying to hurt him. Den-sleeping didn’t make the dreams go away entirely, but it put the adults in a position to wake Draco as soon as he started to show signs of a nightmare, and that helped a lot.

Soon after the Pack went back to sleeping upstairs, Hermione’s birthday came, and was greeted with the pomp and circumstance suitable to the grand age of four. The boys sang her “Happy Birthday” with the edited lyrics so popular among children of all ages, prompting her to whack them both over the head with her new doll. Sirius denied teaching them the altered words.

The fall continued peacefully, as much as it could in a household with three four-year-olds. By Halloween, Draco was smiling on a regular basis, even laughing sometimes. His arrogance, after being almost insufferable through most of August, had slowly dwindled through September and October as he realized it got him nothing, and his timidity was being banished by the casual and loving atmosphere of the Den and the constant company of two boisterous children his own age. He was starting, if the word could be truly applied to any member of the Pack, to be normal.

He would never be like Harry, though. Harry seemed to have no fear and unlimited energy. From the moment he woke up to the moment he fell asleep, he was running somewhere, shouting and laughing, falling and getting back up. Draco was somewhat quieter, more interested in looking at things. Aletha had started giving him piano lessons, because, as she said, “He’s ready. There’s no set age when a child’s ready – it’s when he can sit still long enough to learn and he’s interested.” The sounds from the music room occasionally even resembled music.

Neenie was a bookworm, but had developed a mania for climbing. She could be found in the oddest places reading – curled up on a windowsill, squashed onto a bookshelf, and once, memorably, lying on the railing of the indoor balcony that overlooked both front rooms and was a portion of the upstairs hall. Danger almost had a heart attack when she came in from work, looked up, and saw Hermione balanced precariously on a six-inch-wide piece of wood over a one-story drop, totally engrossed in her book.

Meghan, like Harry, never walked when she could run, and seemed seldom to sit still, unless someone was reading to her or playing with her. She was a willing participant in Neenie’s endless games of den with her dolls, being put to bed and woken up with the rest of the “cubs” every five minutes, and doing everything Hermione told her to without question.

“What is your secret?” Remus asked Neenie rhetorically after a frustrating round of “Why?” with Meghan.

“...and in other news tonight – being in jail is unlucky. Being in jail and getting caught trying to break out is very unlucky. But being in jail, getting caught trying to break out, and being the only one caught out of a gang of 20 – now that’s unlucky! Nicholas Cotton reports...”

Danger gasped as the camera zoomed in on a face she knew quite well. Still looks like a radish with a mustache... “Everyone, come in here! Look at this!”

There was an influx of people into the Whites' front room. Remus and Sirius took one look at the picture on the screen, of a furious man stuck in a window which was just a bit too small for him, and began laughing. "Who is that?" Aletha asked.

"Harry's uncle," Sirius said, as Vernon Dursley tried to cover his face. "The one Remus and Danger cursed. Looks like it's still active. Quality work, Moony."

"Thank you, my friend." Remus gave a little bow. "I wonder what it's doing to Petunia these days?"

A knock sounded on the door of Petunia Dursley's flat. She yanked it open. "I told you, I'd pay when I..." She trailed off. "You're not the landlord."

"No, we're not," said one of the men in the hallway. "Social Services, ma'am."

"May we come in?" the other one asked, his tone making it clear that if she refused, they would come in anyway.

She let them in.

The visit didn't last long, and the men were very kind, but they made it clear what they thought of her, and her efforts to provide a home for her son. They were going to have to take him away with them, they said. For his own good. She could reapply for custody if she could ever prove employment for more than six months at one place, and residence at one address for the same amount of time...

After they left with Dudley, Petunia put her head down on her arms. He's someone else's problem now, she thought absently. Just as well, really. He was starting to act funny. Like the time when he was crying – I told him and told him to be quiet, and when he didn't, and I spanked him, one of the light bulbs shattered...

No more coming home early to take care of him. No more expenses for babysitters or day care. No worries about getting him into a school...this may actually be a good thing for me...

But slowly, spots of moisture began to appear on her sleeve. Draco looked around him. He was in a long, dark hallway, and he could hear footsteps at the other end, his father's footsteps, coming for him –

"Look around you," he remembered someone telling him, "and think about what you see."

He looked down at himself. He was wearing red pajamas and holding a stuffed lion. He had never had red pajamas or a stuffed lion at the manor.

He smiled confidently. I'm at the Den. This is just a scary dream. And I can wake up... NOW!

And wake up he did. Not in his own bed, since he didn't have one – the three of them still slept in the two twin beds pushed together – but in his own home, with his brother and sister cuddled next to him, and his lion under his arm.

No more scary dreams for me.

He looked at the window. The light looked kind of funny. Almost pink.

He sat up carefully, then knelt up to look over Harry and out the window.

It's snowing! It's so pretty, all white like that...

Harry roused under him. "Hi," he said sleepily.

"Hi," Draco said. "Look, it snowing."

"Snowing!" Draco dodged as Harry snapped upright to look out the window himself. "It snowed! We can go out and play in it!"

"Play in it?" Draco asked.

Harry laughed. "You see." He tore out the door of the room. "Moony, Danger, wake up, it snowed, it snowed!"

Draco grinned and shook Hermione by the shoulder. "Neenie, wake up, it snowed."

"Snowed?" Just like that, she was awake. "Snowed?" She sat up, looked out the window, and gave a happy squeal. "Meghan can come and play this year, she's big enough now! We make a snowman, and we make snow angels – "

"We have snowball fights!" Harry said, bouncing back into the room. "And catch snowflakes on our tongues! Come on, we gotta get dressed an' eat breakfast afore we can go out!"

Draco wondered as he pulled on his socks what a snow angel might be, and how to make one. He was sure someone would show him.

That was what he liked best about the Den. There was always someone around to show him things.

Charlie Weasley climbed into the Gryffindor common room and looked around for his brother. "Hoy, Bill."

"What's up, next-up?"

"Just wondering if you knew – does Dumbledore have any family?"

Bill shrugged. "Don't know. Why?"

"Heard him in the hall, talking to McGonagall. He said he'd be spending Christmas somewhere else this year."

"Huh. He usually stays at Hogwarts for the holidays. At least, I think he does. Oh well, not our problem. Term ends in a couple days, and then we're off home."

"Home." Charlie smiled. "Home with Mum, and Dad, and Percy, and Fred..."

“And George, and Ron, and Ginny,” Bill finished the litany. “And then we spend the whole vacation wishing we were back here, where they aren’t.”

“So you say, big brother. So you say.”

Bill gave his infuriating “I-know-more-than-you-because-I’m-oldest” smile. “Indeed I do.”

Lucius Malfoy had bad dreams every night now. But his dream on Christmas Eve was probably the worst he had ever had.

It was filled with images of his son. Draco nestling against Lupin with a sickeningly adoring expression, listening to a story... Draco watching intently as Black’s woman pointed something out to him on a page... Draco throwing a ball for a huge dog, which must be Black, to chase after... Draco licking a wooden spoon covered in cake batter as Lupin’s woman tidied up the kitchen... Draco running after the Potter boy and the Mudblood girl and Black’s daughter, all of them shouting...

In every image, his son was smiling, or even laughing. The boy was happy. He had the audacity to be happy! Malfoys were not made happy by such plebeian things as having stories read to them, or licking cake spoons. Malfoys found their happiness in power plays, in crushing their opponents, in surviving politically when no others did or could.

But, as he was painfully reminded in every scene, his son was no longer a Malfoy.

“Draco Black.” The woman’s insolent voice echoed in his mind, tormenting him. “I rather like the sound of that, don’t you? Draco Black...”

He snarled, knowing the sound would be lost in the constant cacophony of Azkaban. You will pay, Muggle. For that, and for everything else, you will pay.

Even as he thought that, his dream changed yet again, annoying him still more, if that were possible.

How disgustingly sweet. Decorating the Christmas tree. I do not want to see this – which is probably why I am being forced to watch...

Indeed, Lucius was unable even to turn away or close his eyes. Unwilling, he watched the children walk with exaggerated care to hang ornaments on the tree while the adults strung lights and tinsel with their wands.

At least I don't have to listen to them. Silence is golden – more so than usual in this instance...

He was astounded to see Lupin's woman levitate the star for the top of the tree into place. A Muggle who can use a wand? That's supposed to be impossible. Could she be a witch after all, but home-trained?

Black's woman began to sing – this, Lucius found, he could hear. It was "O Christmas Tree", and the rest of the unnatural group joined her, even the children. Even Draco.

Lucius groaned. No. Malfoys do not sing. They may play instruments in a dignified manner, but they do not do anything so primitive as sing.

Self-evidently, though, Draco did. Lucius took minimal comfort in realizing that the boy's voice was quite tone-true, and actually rather pleasant to listen to. If he must do it, at the very least he does it well.

Lupin handed Draco his wand, then lifted the boy onto his shoulders, telling him something. Draco reached out and tapped the nearest tree light with the wand. The lights sprang to life, illuminating the tree. Draco's face lit up as well, with pure joy, as the other children clapped and cheered.

Lupin lifted Draco down from his shoulders, but didn't set him on the floor. Instead, he held the boy on one hip, and Lucius had to watch his son – his son – sliding his arms trustingly around the neck of that

disgusting, filthy, halfblood, Muggle-loving, werewolf, and resting his head on the creature's shoulder!

He lunged forward, unable to stop himself any longer, to snatch the boy away and beat some sense into him –

And he was awake, in his stinking cell in Azkaban, with the other prisoners screaming around him, and black despair in his heart.

If they can get so far with him after less than six months, what chance do I have? By the time the Dark Lord returns – if he ever does – Draco will be faithful to them, and forever lost to me...

He howled in misery, finally surrendering his dignity. No one can see me anyway. No one will ever see me again. I will be here until I die.

Death, at this point, might be desirable...

Early on Christmas morning, Albus Dumbledore arrived at 71 Crozer Street, bearing a stack of gifts and a plate of scones. "Hogwarts has a new house-elf in its employ," he told the Pack. "One named Dobby, who told me the most interesting tale about how he was freed. He made these for you, and wonders if perhaps, sometime, he could come to visit his little master."

Danger took a bite and rolled her eyes in ecstasy. "He can come any time he likes, if he bakes like this. I may give up cooking."

"Don't do that, we'll all starve if you do," Sirius said.

"Yes, and you will start starving if I don't start getting help with the washing-up," Danger retorted. "That novel you're working on can occasionally wait until the dinner dishes are done."

Sirius flushed. "Did you have to bring that up?"

"A novel, Sirius?" Dumbledore looked interested. "I didn't know you wrote."

"I don't suppose you ever read Witch Weekly, Headmaster," said Aletha, "but Sirius has become a regular contributor. Under a pen name, of course."

Sirius was now as red as any of the Christmas bulbs and beginning to get some of the cubs' attention, which was quite a feat on Christmas morning with unopened packages under the tree. "Can we get to these before Harry dies of impatience, and discuss my work later?"

"If you insist," Remus said, hiding a smile behind the first present he held up. "This one's for Neenie – go to it, sweetheart."

Nearly an hour and about an acre of shredded wrapping paper later, the children were ignoring all their new toys and playing in the large cardboard box one of them had come in. "Never fails," Remus said. "We should stop getting them presents and just get them boxes."

"Don't think I haven't considered it," Danger said ruefully.

Sirius, in the other room, was explaining to Dumbledore about his career as a writer, and how the short period romances of Valentina Jett had become an eagerly awaited feature in Witch Weekly, appearing every two months.

"And when they started paying, you knew you liked it," Aletha said with a chuckle. "So when they offered to publish a novel if you'd write one, of course you said yes."

"It's not like I have anything else to do, after all. Except raise the children, and that is a lot of work, but with the four of us sharing them, it still leaves me plenty of spare time. And you know I don't just like it for the money," Sirius growled, pushing Aletha playfully. "I like it because... because when I write, I can make everything come out all right. The good guys win, the truth is revealed, and there's always a happy ending."

"Are you saying everything hasn't come out all right for you?" Remus asked from the doorway, curiously rather than accusingly.

Sirius sighed, his eyes taking on a bit of the darkness of Azkaban, which they had never completely lost. "For now, it has. But you know as well as I do, our lives are precarious. One person sees too much, one of us makes one mistake, and it's over. We could be separated forever at any time." He gave a short laugh as Aletha slid an arm comfortingly around his shoulders. "I guess I hope if I write enough happy endings, I'll get one myself."

"I could use some help in here if you want Christmas dinner at any time approaching noon!" Danger called from the kitchen. Month followed month in the usual order, and life at the Den continued to be predictably unpredictable. No two days were ever the same – except in being happy. The knowledge that the world was looking for them, with no good intent, served to keep the fights among the adults few and far between.

The cubs, of course, squabbled as all small children do, but more amicably than most, taking and changing sides at a moment's notice and laughing about it all together a few minutes later. Meghan, as she had since she was old enough to notice, tried gallantly to keep up with the older three, going where they went and trying her very best to do what they did. Even when what they did was dangerous for her.

"You are not big enough to be sliding down the banisters like that!" Sirius scolded her one day, plucking her off the rail, where she was sitting at an alarming angle. "You come upstairs with me and play where I can see you."

Meghan made a face. "No fair." It was one of the first phrases she had ever said.

"Yes fair. I'm your father, and I say so, therefore it's fair. Let's go." Sirius, in dog form, lay across three beams of sunlight in Aletha's front room, snoring lustily. Harry beckoned Hermione and Draco into the room. Meghan followed them, her baby hands wrapped around two bottles she had taken from the fridge on Harry's order.

The junior pranksters went to work.
Sirius awoke and sniffed.

I smell ketchup.

Someone snickered nearby.

I also smell mustard.

Someone else laughed aloud. There was the sound of a photograph being taken.

I don't like this.

"Padfoot," said Remus' voice quietly. "You fell asleep in the sun. That made you hot. Therefore, you were a hot dog. And certain inhabitants of this Den took advantage of that." There was a pause, as Sirius heard what he could now identify as Danger's giggle. "You're going to need a bath."

Sirius opened his eyes and looked at himself. He was almost completely covered in condiments.

Well, at least they have spirit. The children had drawn the Gryffindor lion on him in ketchup and mustard. And look on the bright side – they could have used mayonnaise. I hate mayonnaise.

With these thoughts to cheer him, he stood up and Apparated into the bathtub, where he nosed the water on and began rinsing himself off.

But I want those pictures destroyed.

Exams were over. Tonks lay by the lake, feeling extraordinarily good about life, since, for the first time in a month, she had nothing in particular to do...

"Look, they're here again," Charlie said, pointing out the family crossing the grounds. "They come a lot, don't they? I wonder if they're relatives of Hagrid's."

“One of them’s a friend of my mum’s,” Tonks said, rolling over to have a look. “The black woman. Ms. Freeman, I think. And the others are her neighbors, I don’t remember their names...”

One of the little boys, the black-haired one, tugged away from the woman whose hand he was holding and started running. Tonks watched him go, and something stirred in her mind. Being a Metamorphmagus, she was used to seeing her own face under all different colors of hair. But why am I thinking about that?

Something about that boy’s face made her uneasy. As if she’d seen him somewhere before, and he had looked somehow different – his hair had been a different color, perhaps...

“Tonks? You all right?”

“Fine.”

“They’re about my youngest brother’s age,” Charlie said, watching the other two of the bigger children run after the first one. “Ron. Maybe they’ll be in his year. When he’s at Hogwarts. We’ll have left by then. What do you think you want to do when you leave?”

Tonks shrugged. “Don’t know. You?”

“Something outside, that’s for sure. No desk jobs. I hate being indoors.” He looked at her keenly. “I can’t see you on a desk job either. You’re a more active sort...”

The discussion lasted a good half-hour and almost drove the little boy with the annoyingly familiar face from Tonks’ mind. Almost, but not quite.

When she got back to her dormitory, she pulled out a box from under her bed. In it, she kept things she almost never used – like her family photo album. She flipped it open and started looking. She had no luck, until she found the wedding picture of her mother’s younger sister, her Aunt Narcissa, side by side with her haughty pureblood husband, Lucius Malfoy...

Of course, they weren't side by side any more. In fact, Lucius was almost entirely out of the picture, and Narcissa was just barely visible on the other side. Clearly, whatever their feelings had been at one point, they loathed one another now. Tonks prodded Lucius in the back with her wand, and was rewarded with a glimpse of his sneering face before he ducked back under the frame.

A glimpse had been enough. He was a dead ringer for that little boy on the lawn. Except for the hair, which could be easily changed with a simple charm or potion.

Did I just solve one of the wizarding world's great unsolved mysteries? Did I just find Draco Malfoy?

And if I did – what do I do now?

She bit her lip – then did what any smart girl would do.

She wrote her mother.

Dear Mum,

I think I saw your nephew today. He was running around with your friend Ms. Freeman and her neighbors and their little kids. He was with them that day in Diagon Alley when you bought me my stuff too, only they called him Reggie. They charmed his hair black, but it's him. What should I do?

Love from

Dora

The answer came the next morning, by return owl.

Dearest Dora,

Do nothing. Especially say nothing, to anyone. You are a very bright girl to see so much, but some secrets are not meant to be told. Does he seem happy with them? Please let me know.

With love,

Your mother

Tonks pulled a quill from her bag and scribbled a reply on a scrap piece of parchment, right at the breakfast table.

Mum –

He looked just fine. He was running and playing like any other kid. And I won't tell anyone.

– Dora

Sending it off with the rather disgruntled post owl, she smiled to herself. So now I have a secret. Wonder how many other people know?

Wish I could tell Charlie. He'd think it was really cool.

Valentina Jett's novel *Happy Ending* was published in July, to critical acclaim. "A fresh new voice, with an understanding of the trials of human life," one review said. Another called it "well-crafted and a touch wistful, eventually achieving the status of its title in a fully believable way."

But the one that got the Den in an uproar read: "The author's female characters are well drawn and realistic. She clearly knows the truth of being a woman."

"Is there something you're not telling me, dear?" Aletha said when she'd recovered from her five-minute laughing fit.

"Look, everyone, a medical miracle," Remus said, scooping up a slightly startled Meghan. "First baby ever naturally conceived with two mothers!"

"Come off it," Sirius said, grinning himself.

“These people are going to get a big surprise one of these days,” Danger commented. “A really big surprise.”

“You said it, not me,” Aletha said with a naughty smile.

(A/N: I should so have been in bed an hour ago... but I was so relieved that all the relatives have FINALLY gone home (though my grandmother’s story about her neighbor whose brother was a mobster was kind of cool) that I just had to post a chapter to celebrate!

OK, who flipped out when they saw the chapter title? No, it’s not over yet! Time for... FAQ’s! Getcher answers here, red-hot answers!

How long will this story be? Current plan is for 40 chapters, but everything changes.

Will we ever see the Weasleys/the Dursleys/Tonks/Umbridge/fill in the character again? Probably yes. If not in this story, then in the se – :clamps hand over mouth, but it’s too late:

Did you say SEQUEL? Is there going to be a SEQUEL? Oh dear. Yes.

WHEN? WHEN? When LwD ends, of course!

When will LwD end? If you’re talking real time, I have no idea. Schoolwork/family may interfere with writing and posting, or they may help. But if you mean story-type time, “Living with Danger” will end on September 1, 1991, and if you have to ask what the characters will be doing that day, what kind of HP fan are you, anyway?

What will the sequel be called? Don’t laugh at me... it’s currently called “Living without Danger”. Unless I have some kind of amazing idea between now and then, that’s its title.

What will it be about? Oh, let’s see... a sequel to a “Harry grows up” fic – could it possibly be “Harry goes to Hogwarts”? Why, of course it could! And could it possibly be based on canon, but changed around to fit my crazy twisted little universe? Why, yes indeed! And that’s all I’m saying, until I start writing it!

So, onwards, possibly not till the New Year, but you know me... can't stop writing... Happy New Year, everyone, just in case!)

Chapter 25: Curiosity and What It Killed

Severus Snape would have been perfectly happy to stay in his beloved dungeons for days, weeks, on end. But the Headmaster had the house-elves under his command, and in the summer they would only deliver two meals a day to his living quarters. If he wanted a third, he had to emerge and get it from the kitchens himself, or eat in the Hall with the rest of the faculty.

During the school year (which, he remembered with distaste, would be starting again soon), the ridiculous rules were even tighter. Only one meal a day would be delivered, and even that was frowned upon. And house-elves had a way of letting one know, ever so subtly, when they were displeased. It was never anything one could put one's finger on, but the soup, say, would be just a touch too salty, and if one sent it back, it would return too watery; or the salad would have no dressing, and the horrendous miniscule creature would apologize profusely and proceed to drown the lettuce with goo. And so on.

And so it was that he was coming up from the dungeons in search of a late lunch when he saw Aletha Freeman crossing the entrance hall, talking to a little boy whose hand she was holding. Her other hand had a lead wrapped around it, connected to the collar of an enormous black dog.

Does she have nothing better to do? I see her here almost every other week. Ministry Liaison or not, that is absurd. And always with these other people tagging along.

The other people in question were behind her, a man and woman gazing adoringly at one another, each with another child by the hand – no, the woman had two, the smaller of which belonged to Freeman if he wasn't mistaken. He stopped to observe them.

They appear to be about my age, but I have never met them that I recall... they could be immigrants, home-educated, or non-magical. The third is improbable, considering the anti-Muggle security on this school, so it is likely one of the first two...

And I thought I had trained myself out of curiosity. Here I am, exhibiting it again. Clearly, I need more self-discipline.

Snape started for the hallway which led to the kitchens.

He had gone only a few steps when something hit him in the back, knocking him to the ground and winding him. He twisted over onto his back, gasping for breath –

And the thing started licking him. It was the gargantuan dog Freeman had been walking. It must have pulled the lead from her hand.

“Padfoot!” Freeman shouted, running towards him. “Come here! Bad dog! Come!”

The dog paused, looked at her, then turned back deliberately and gave Snape one more enormous lick, thoroughly coating his face with a repulsive slime of saliva. Then it – minced was the only word possible – over to Freeman, who backhanded it on the nose. “Bad dog. Bad Padfoot. If you ever play a trick like that again, I’ll have you neutered!”

The dog whined and lowered its head.

“That’s better.” Freeman looked over at Snape, who had pulled himself into a sitting position and was attempting to dry his face with his sleeve. “I’m terribly sorry, Professor. Are you all right?”

“I will be perfectly fine, Madam Freeman,” Snape said through his teeth. “Please try to control that... animal of yours better in the future.”

Of course she named her dog after Sirius Black, he thought bitterly, picking himself up off the floor as Freeman and her flock of followers headed for the open front doors. I should have expected that.

I wonder where he is now. Two years since the sighting in Diagon Alley. With Harry Potter in his arms, no less. Is he taunting us, I wonder? That would be very like him, would it not...

Remus maintained a straight face all the way across the grounds and into Hagrid's back garden, where he sat down on the back steps, looked at Sirius, and started laughing uncontrollably. Sirius, for his part, rolled ecstatically on his back, paws waving, emitting a high-pitched noise that sounded like a cross between a gleeful whine and a howl of joy. Aletha leaned weakly against the wall of Hagrid's hut, unable to stand upright.

In between giggles, Danger explained what Sirius had done to the bewildered Hagrid, who promptly joined in the laughter, drowning everyone else out for a moment or two. "Licked his face!" he guffawed. "Yeh'll need a drink after tha', I think!" He filled a bowl for Sirius out of his water barrel, who lapped it up gratefully.

The children silently communicated bewilderment. It had been funny, but not that funny. Adults were strange sometimes.

The Pack had come to Hogwarts for several reasons – to have lunch with the Headmaster, of course, and to say hello to Hagrid, but Aletha had also brought a number of official documents with her, some of which were intended for Minerva McGonagall, and although she had dropped these off with the Deputy Headmistress, she had accidentally left one upstairs, in Professor Dumbledore's office.

Of such accidents are stories made.

Late that same evening, Minerva sighed, checking through the parchments Aletha had dropped off. I thought they were sending me a copy of that new decree about animal-to-human transfiguration. They were certainly very flattering in the letter – "world authority" and "lend your expertise".

Perhaps Aletha merely forgot to bring it with her. Or it got lost in the shuffle of papers. She asked her great-grandmother to check and see if, by any chance, it was on Dumbledore's desk, and in a few moments had her answer – it was.

I doubt he'll mind if I pop up there and get it. She was on her way almost before she had finished the thought.

As she picked up the decree, she noticed a photograph half-covered by another sheet of parchment. A lighted Christmas tree and the edge of Dumbledore's favorite holiday robes were visible.

I wonder. Where did Albus spend this past Christmas? He almost never leaves Hogwarts at the holidays – the last time I remember him doing so was to visit his brother in jail, and that was years ago...

It couldn't hurt, just to have a look. One look.

Feeling an unexpected rush of lawbreaking spirit, she tugged the photograph free.

Two small children sat on Albus' lap in a rocking chair, with two others perched precariously on the arms of the chair. He was reading to them from a picture book. She noticed that first, and smiled.

Then she noticed the children's faces, and screamed, dropping the picture as if it were a snake.

"I say!" said a disapproving voice from the wall. "Some of us are trying to sleep here!"

"My apologies," Minerva said automatically, while taking another, disbelieving look at the photograph where it lay on the desk.

This cannot possibly be true.

But the boy on Albus' lap, pale-blond and aristocratic, the image of Lucius Malfoy, could only be his missing son, Draco. The girl beside him was certainly Aletha Freeman's daughter Meghan. And the black-haired boy balanced on the chair arm was unmistakably Harry Potter.

And I have seen the other girl somewhere – heavens above, I saw her today. She was with the people Aletha had with her. Along with two little boys...who could have been Harry and the Malfoy child, under glamours...

But everyone knows that Sirius Black has Harry Potter. How could Aletha Freeman possibly be involved with...

She gasped as previously unconsidered things locked together in her mind.

The ring Aletha wears – the ring she began wearing shortly after Black's escape – a wedding ring, no matter what she claims. And her child – supposedly adopted, but she bears a suspicious resemblance to her mother, except for her eyes, her gray eyes...

That dementor last year did not enter Aletha's house by chance. It was seeking Sirius Black!

She all but ran from the Headmaster's office, her mind racing. One thought came uppermost as she regained the safety of her own desk and chair.

I must know the truth. If Albus has in some way become unbalanced enough to permit this – this – atrocity – then I must know that, so that I can begin the necessary proceedings.

I must go to Aletha's home. But not like this. No, I must go in a form no one will regard, no one will notice...

And I have such a form at my command.

After all, who looks twice at another gray alley cat?

She quickly scribbled a note to leave on her desk.

Out, back later. MM

After closing and locking her office door, she stowed her wand safely away and transformed, since she made better time with four feet than with two.

As well, I am easier to overlook in this form. This is one errand I would rather not be seen going on.

She hurried from the castle and onto the path to Hogsmeade, her thoughts moving as swiftly as her paws.

Aletha and her friends always go to visit Hagrid after they have seen Albus. Does Hagrid know who they are? And if he does, why has he said nothing?

She sighed at her own obtuseness. Of course, Hagrid would reach with his bare hand into a dragon's mouth if Albus told him to. He would consider it an honor to share in such a secret. But I cannot think he would countenance any mistreatment of Harry...

Her mind darted onto a tangent. Aletha's friends. A man and a woman. The children are supposedly theirs. Who are they? What have they to do with this? Do I know either of them?

She recalled something from their brief visit to her office. The man never spoke. The woman did all the talking, to the children and to Aletha. Why would he remain silent?

Perhaps because if he spoke, I would recognize his voice?

He's not Black under a glamour, though. Black is a bit taller, and broader in the shoulders. No, this man is built more like...

Like Remus Lupin.

Who has not been seen since Black's escape and Harry's abduction, and whose voice I certainly would know.

She speeded up. She needed to know the truth, and she needed to know it now.

The Pack sat on their front steps, watching the sun set.

Danger gave a sigh of pure contentment and leaned back against Remus' shoulder. Have I mentioned lately that I love you?

Only four times today.

Oh dear, I'm behindhand. I love you, I love you, I love you. There, that should bring me up to speed.

Remus laughed aloud. Have I mentioned lately that I love your sense of humor?

Yes, you have, but I always like hearing it again...
A feline head poked around the corner of the house.

I would know that laugh anywhere. Quiet but earnest, just like the man himself. Lupin.

And that dog... Her eyes fixed on it, and she hissed. That dog is not a dog. Who did the transfiguration, I wonder?

It is a truism among wizards and witches that one human in animal form, whether Animagus or transfigured, can always pick out another. Patrick the Plump, for instance, was a very successful thief, robbing fifteen stores in Diagon Alley on separate days and always vanishing before the Aurors arrived, until one day a young man whose Animagus form was a falcon took to the skies and noticed a certain fat pigeon who had a bit of a different look to him...

Of course, the noticing goes both ways. If the unfortunate Patrick had ever looked up, he would have been able to tell that the winged death descending on him from the skies was not really a falcon...

Sirius' head snapped up, and he looked quickly to one side. With a thunderous bark, he launched himself across the yard, chasing a gray blur which appeared from out of nowhere.

"What is that?" Aletha got to her feet, exchanging bewildered looks with Remus and Danger.

"Ki'y!" Meghan exclaimed, running after her father.

The gray blur shot down the road and up the small ornamental tree in the two-doors-down-neighbors' front yard, where it resolved itself, in the failing light of dusk augmented by the streetlights, into a small gray cat.

Sirius sat down at the foot of the tree and growled at the cat. He looked back at the rest of the Pack and beckoned them closer with a paw.

“Something’s up,” Aletha said. “He wouldn’t go after just any old cat like that.”

Remus intercepted Meghan halfway down the sidewalk and took another look at the cat from his closer vantage point, while Meghan squalled and kicked at him, trying to get away.

Danger felt his surprise, tinged with worry and a touch of humor, reverberate through her. Dear Lord, it’s got spectacle markings around its eyes.

And that means... Danger tapped Remus’ memories, and was rewarded with an image of a stern-faced woman changing into a spectacle-marked cat – a Hogwarts Professor, no less, and the head of Gryffindor House, responsible for many of the Marauders’ detentions in their school days. Oh no, and Sirius has her treed...

It’s unlikely she’s here by accident. She must know something. Tell Aletha what’s up, would you?

Danger relayed the information, and Aletha sighed, looking torn between laughter and concern. “Cubs, go inside,” she said quietly. “Now. And stay there until we call you.”

Draco looked like he wanted to ask why, but Neenie and Harry got up without question, and after a brief moment Draco followed them into the Den and closed the door.

Remus was now standing beside the ornamental tree, his eyes approximately level with McGonagall’s, Meghan in his arms demanding to pet the kitty now. As Aletha and Danger came down the sidewalk, McGonagall inched forward on the branch she was crouched on and delicately slid her head under Meghan’s reaching fingers. Meghan squealed happily and patted McGonagall’s head, in an enthusiastic two-year-old kind of way. The cat winced.

Remus caught Meghan's hand. "Gentle, Meghan," he said firmly. "Show me gentle."

Meghan stroked Remus' arm softly.

"That's right. That's gentle. Now you be gentle with the kitty."

Meghan started stroking the small gray head. It was made easier for her by McGonagall's fixed stare at Remus.

It's been a while since I've had one of these.

One of what?

The patented "Minerva McGonagall I-Know-What-You-Did Look of Doom". Though yours come close, my dear.

Decisions, decisions... should I hit you, thank you, or both?

Aletha was holding a hand-signal yes-and-no conversation with Sirius. After a moment, she made a brief series of signals to Remus and Danger.

They both think we should at least try telling her the truth. Input?

You know her, I don't. Your decision.

Remus nodded to Aletha and Sirius. "Nice to see you again, Professor," he said quietly. "Would you care to come inside and talk?"

The cat looked skeptical.

"No evasions," Aletha said. McGonagall turned her head to put Aletha under scrutiny. "No lies, no half-truths. We'll tell you everything that's going on, if you're willing to believe it."

The cat looked hard at each of them, then delicately stretched, yawned, and stood up, tail waving in graceful curves. With a last

mistrustful glance at Sirius, she leapt to the ground and followed Aletha toward the Den.

That was easy.

But convincing her may not be. She's liable to curse us all if she feels threatened in any way.

I have an idea about that. Danger explained.

Good thinking. Remus dropped back to talk to Sirius, while Danger sped up a little to tell Aletha the plan.

Now all we have to do is hope she believes us...

Minerva trotted up the front steps of the duplex, every nerve alert. Her original reconnaissance had shown only protective magics on the house – no wards against Apparation, no booby traps – but she was still deeply mistrustful of this.

But subtlety was never Sirius Black's strong suit. I assume it is he who is in control here, since he was apparently quite high in the esteem of You-Know-Who – oh, all right, damn you, Albus, in Voldemort's esteem.

Thinking of Albus' calm insistence that she use the evil wizard's proper name joggled Minerva's memory of a particular time when he had done so – a November night, when they had sat outside a prim house in Surrey together, waiting for the arrival of a little boy...

A little boy who was removed from that house not even six months later. Knowing what I know about those people, I cannot help but be relieved – unless, as I have feared ever since, he was taken from a bad home to a worse one...

The four people following her reached the steps. Lupin reached carefully over her head with his non-child-holding-arm and opened the door. "After you, Professor," he said politely.

You want me to enter a strange house first? You must be joking. Minerva shook her head.

“As you wish,” Lupin said. He mounted the steps and entered the house, turning on a light within. Then he reached into his pocket and withdrew his wand. Minerva tensed – but he laid the wand carefully on a table just within sight of the door. “We mean you no harm,” he said. “And to this we pledge our wands.”

Aletha and the other woman likewise entered the house and disarmed themselves.

Minerva eyed the huge black dog balefully. If you make one wrong move...

But the dog bounded up the steps and into the house, rounded the corner of the door so that a passer-by would no longer be able to see him, then reared onto his hind legs and casually changed into Sirius Black.

Black, an Animagus! I knew he was good at Transfiguration, but I never dreamed he was that good!

Black, too, placed his wand on the table. “Our home is yours, Professor,” he said politely.

Minerva hesitated for one more moment. This might still be some kind of trick...

Then she heard the sound of pattering feet.

A little boy, his hair blond and tousled, ran into her line of sight, straight to Black, and hugged him around the waist, which was as high as he could reach. Black smiled and picked him up, and the boy turned inquisitive green eyes on her.

My God. I know those eyes.

Almost against her will, she stepped forward into the house, and the strange woman reached behind her to shut the door.

Upon returning to his office, Professor Dumbledore noticed a piece of parchment lying on the floor, where it had not been when he had left.

And a certain photograph lay exposed on the desk, where it had been hidden before.

“Who was here while I was gone?” he asked the portraits sternly.

Half a dozen voices volunteered that it had been Minerva McGonagall, that she’d come for a copy of something that had been forgotten, that she’d pulled out the picture from under the parchment hiding it, that she’d seemed very agitated by it...

“Yes, I have no doubt she was,” Dumbledore said grimly. And I have no doubt she is by now investigating the matter herself...

The instant the door was closed, Minerva retransformed, drawing an amazed “Ooh” from the child in Black’s arms, and drew her wand.

“What is going on here?” she demanded.

“I win,” Lupin said, grinning at Black.

Minerva blinked. “Win? Win what?”

“We had a bet on. I said you’d get us at wandpoint first, then ask what was going on. Sirius said you’d ask first.” Lupin looked highly satisfied. “So now he has to do the dishes for three days.”

“Oh, now wait just a second,” Black protested. “One day is all I bet.”

“No, you said three,” the strange woman put in. “I distinctly remember you saying three.”

“You did say three,” Aletha said, chuckling. “And you wouldn’t want to break a promise, now would you, Padfoot? Not setting a very good example there.”

Black glared at all of them, then sighed. “All right, fine, you win, three...”

“Three what?” asked the little boy.

“Three days I have to do the dishes, Harry. Moony just suckered me into it.”

“Moony,” Harry scolded. “Not nice to sucker Padfoot.”

“That’s right,” Black said, looking vindicated.

“Too easy,” Harry finished.

“That’s ri – hey!” Black dropped Harry to the floor in outrage as the other adults laughed.

“QED, Padfoot,” Lupin said, shaking his head.

Black groaned. “I can’t win.”

Minerva stared at them all, baffled, her wand dropping to her side. It was a dialogue she had heard many times before. Never quite in these words, of course, but it was exactly the style of joking banter that the four boys who had styled themselves the Marauders had always used. And it was impossible to reconcile with her current image of Sirius Black – traitor, murderer, kidnapper...

Something is wrong here.

“Professor,” said Aletha quietly. “Would you care to sit down?”

“Yes,” Minerva said frankly. “Yes, I think I would like that very much indeed.”

“Would you mind unglamouring the children?” the other woman asked as they all found seats.

“Children?” But then she saw the other little boy and the little girl, peering down between the bars of the balcony railing overhead.

“Come on down, you two,” Lupin called.

“Yes, the boys are both beglamoured. Remus is as well, if you wouldn’t mind...”

Minerva flicked her wand at the three wizards as a chime sounded from the other room. “Excuse me,” Aletha said, standing up. “That’s the fireplace.”

The little girl with the brown bushy hair – who rather closely resembled the woman Minerva didn’t know, she noticed – climbed into Lupin’s lap, as the other boy, now obviously Draco Malfoy, claimed Black’s. Harry, dark-haired again and looking startlingly like his father, was cuddled next to Black, and Meghan sat at his feet, absorbed in a small and brightly colored toy that made clacking noises as she turned it over and over. The older three children were eyeing Minerva curiously, as if she were something they’d never seen before.

But it is not fear. They are not afraid of me. And they are certainly not afraid of Black.

“Something is very wrong here,” she said quietly in frustration.

“Indeed,” said a voice she knew quite well, but had not expected to hear, startling her into a small jump.

Though considering what brought me here, perhaps I should have.

“Professor!” The little girl slid quickly to the floor and ran to Albus Dumbledore, hugging him around the legs. “Be welcome in our Den,” she recited when she let go.

“Be welcome,” the boys repeated from behind her, giving little bows, then each solemnly extending a hand for Dumbledore to shake. Meghan dropped her toy and came over, beaming at Dumbledore, and he lifted her up, placing her on his shoulder, where she giggled and held onto his hair for balance.

“The only thing wrong, Minerva, is the story you know about Sirius Black and the Potters, which is wrong almost in its entirety,”

Dumbledore said, seating himself and placing Meghan in his lap after disentangling her. "I assume you want an explanation for all of this, and my involvement in it."

"I do," Minerva said fervently. She looked away from Dumbledore's eyes, ostensibly to take a look around the room, but really because – well, because he knew. She could see it in his face; he knew what she had done, and how she had found out where these people were.

And she also knew he would never mention it, to her or to anyone. She would simply be included in this secret, as if she had a right to be, as if these people had chosen to tell her instead of having her invade their life.

And that is one of Albus' greatest weapons. The guilt of others. He simply allows them to punish themselves for wrongdoing, as much or as little as they choose...

There are days I hate him for it.

She shook her head slightly and prepared to listen to what she was sure would be a close-to-unbelievable story.

But with this cast of characters, I will be surprised at almost nothing.
(A/N: Aaagh, I had this ready to post last night, and freaking ff . net decides to have its servers overload... sorry everyone for making you wait!

Also sorry for freaking people out... do not assume the worst about the title of the sequel. Please. I'm not going to tell you if anything happens to the characters (that would remove the element of suspense) but remember, "Living without Danger" is a Hogwarts fic, so the cubs will be away from her and the rest of the pack for most of the year. That might well be all the title means. But, of course, it might not... :evil grin: Keep reading!

Also thanks to everyone who enjoyed the hot dog prank. True confession – I did that (for that reason – hot day, hot dog) when I was four years old. I used only ketchup, but since our dog was a Golden Retriever, the result was quite colorful. Glad I'm not the only one!

OK, last update of the year – here's to 2005 and HBP... :happy dance:)

Chapter 26: What's in a Name?

"Letha, time to get up."

"No."

"Come on, you're going to be late."

"Don't care."

"You will if I have to use this."

"Use wha – " Aletha opened her eyes and froze in terror. Sirius had a bucket in his hand. And he was swinging it back – and there was something in it –

She vaulted out of bed as he threw the contents towards her.

Several old rags flew from it and landed on the bed.

"It was a trick? Why, you – you sneaky – you Marauder you!"

Sirius chuckled. "Thank you. Besides, it worked, didn't it? You're up. And about time, too. You've got less than half an hour."

Aletha snarled at her husband and slammed the bathroom door shut behind her.

"Ronald, time to get up."

"Mmmmmm."

"Come along, now, breakfast is ready."

"Huunnh?" Molly Weasley watched as the mention of food penetrated her youngest son's stupor. "Breakfast?"

"That's right. Breakfast. Everyone else is already downstairs, so if you don't get up soon, there won't be anything left."

“A’right.” Covering a huge yawn with his hand, the five-year-old slid out of bed and gave his mother a good-morning hug before he started hunting for a clean pair of socks.

“Neville, time to get up.”

The boy yawned. “Yes, Gran,” he said on the tail end of it.

“We’re going to Diagon Alley today, so don’t dawdle. Breakfast is in ten minutes, and I expect you to be ready. Understand?”

“Unnerstand.” Neville sat up, rubbing his eyes, and clambered out of his big old bed as his gran closed his bedroom door with a squeak and a firm thud.

“Dudley, time to get up.”

The boy moaned. “I don’t wanna,” he said petulantly.

“That doesn’t matter. Up you come.” His foster mother turned on the light in his bedroom. “It’s 8:30. Quite time to be up. There’s a lot to do today – we’re going out shopping, for one – and I want to get an early start. Come along, breakfast will be ready in a few minutes.”

Dudley grumbled, but several months’ worth of experience told him that if he didn’t get up, he would be physically removed from the bed, gently but firmly, and possibly be docked the one sweet he was allowed to have in a day. He sat up, slowly, and heaved himself out of bed.

It was less of an operation than it had been those months ago. A fairly strict diet, carefully enforced by his foster family, and quite a lot of exercise in the form of light chores and housework had done what even the privations of living with his mother in a series of hotel rooms and junky flats had never managed – slimmed him down considerably. Dudley had been surprised to discover that it was possible to see one’s shoes while standing up.

But it was awful, the way they treated him, Dudley decided as he got dressed. Every time he asked for something, his foster parents said

no. If he asked for a snack, or a new toy, or to be let off his chores, the answer was always the same. “No.” Whining, complaining, begging, pleading, and throwing temper tantrums, which had almost always worked with his mother, only got him the same answer, applied to even more things. “No, Dudley. No.”

When I grow up, Dudley decided, I’m going to be important. Important and rich and powerful. Then no one can ever tell me no, ever again. By 8:45, the three adults of the Pack with outside jobs had all left. Aletha, of course, Floored or Apparated to work. Danger tended to walk, since the branch bookstore where she worked was less than a mile from the Den, and she enjoyed the exercise. Remus drove to the grocery store and parked, as usual, in the employee lot behind the store.

He walked in on what would usually have been termed an argument, except that the two people involved were best friends. Sue, Remus’ colleague in the bakery department, and Mica, from produce, were always amiably bickering about something. Today, it was books.

“ – trying to tell you, they said they’d never heard of the woman,” Mica was saying as Remus came through the door. “And they’re the biggest bookseller in London. If they’ve never heard of her, how good can she be?”

Sue sighed. “And I’ve been trying to tell you, you can’t find her work at just any old bookseller. It’s specialty stuff. I told you I’d lend you my copy when I finished – ”

“And what if I don’t want to wait until you finish it?” Mica retorted. “What if I want to read it now? Especially because I know your reading speed. I lent you a book two years ago and you still haven’t returned it.”

“I did so.”

“You did not.”

“Good morning,” Remus said politely, tying on his store apron. Both women oriented on him.

“John, settle something for us,” Sue said. “Have you ever heard of a writer named Valentina Jett?”

A childhood spent keeping a secret was immensely useful in training one not to reveal one’s true feelings, Remus reflected. He wanted to laugh, but all he did was say, “Yes, as a matter of fact, my wife’s a great fan of hers. Why?”

“Thank you!” Sue threw her hands into the air, as if celebrating a victory. “See, Mica, John’s heard of her. She’s bigger than you know. Your birthday’s coming – I’ll get you a copy of Happy Ending. You’ll be hooked.”

“Whatever happened to not knowing birthday presents until the birthday?” Mica asked rhetorically, standing up and picking up a crate of apples. “You win. I believe you. Come on, we open in five minutes.”

Ron Weasley kicked a small stone against the curb, trying to keep himself amused while his mother and two oldest brothers bought schoolbooks in one of the secondhand stores of Diagon Alley. Percy, nine years old and bossy as any girl, had been left in charge of him and his twin brothers. Ron thought that was a bit optimistic of his mother. No one except her was ever in charge of Fred and George, other than Fred and George.

Looking around for something to do, he saw another boy about his own age standing outside the Apothecary, looking a bit lost.

Maybe he’d want to play.

Ron went over to the boy. “Hi,” he said, holding out his hand. “I’m Ron.”

“Neville,” the other boy said, shaking his hand. He had brown hair and a round face. “My gran’s in there.” He pointed through the

window, to an older witch in a hat with a bird on it, who was leaning over the counter to tell the man behind it something.

“My mum’s down there,” Ron said, pointing back towards the store. “And all my brothers.”

“I don’t have any brothers. Just me and Gran. And loads of aunts and uncles.” Neville made a face. “They’re always trying to get me to show magic. They think I’m a Squib.”

“I’m sorry.”

“RONALD WEASLEY!” shouted a voice.

“Oops,” Ron said guiltily, and took off running. “Bye,” he shouted over his shoulder.

“Bye,” Neville called after him.

“Can I ask you something?” Remus said to Sue as they restocked the doughnut case.

“If you like.”

“How did you find out about Valentina Jett? As far as I know, she writes for a fairly limited market.”

Sue shrugged. “About how old do I look to you?”

Remus looked her up and down. “Forty?” he guessed tentatively.

“Flatterer. You’re off by ten. I’ve got a daughter who’s probably older than you. She...” Sue hesitated. “She went to a special school. Wore yellow and black a lot. She sent me the book.”

“I know a few people who wore yellow and black,” Remus said with a small smile, which Sue returned. “Good friends to have – they never let you down.”

Hmm. A Muggleborn Hufflepuff, a few years older than us... Might be able to look her up someday, after this is all over.

A shopping cart turned the corner into the bakery section. A somewhat harried-looking woman was pushing it, with two boys behind her, both about five years old, shoving each other. "Matthew – Dudley – stop it," she said wearily.

Dudley? I wonder...

Remus glanced at the boys. They were still scuffling, having ignored the woman completely. The shorter one was rather pudgy, though the way his clothes hung on him suggested he had recently been larger. He had blond hair and a look about him that suggested his most natural expression was a pout.

Are you busy? he called silently.

Just a second. Faintly he heard Danger chirrup, "Have a nice day!" to her customer. Not anymore. What's happening?

Do you know this boy? Remus opened his eyes to her.

I might. He looks familiar. Like someone I knew before I met you. He looks... good heavens, he looks like Harry's cousin.

That's what I thought. The woman he's with called him Dudley. That's not too common a name.

No, it's not. So I guess he is Dudley Dursley. But that's not Petunia he's with, Danger said with certainty, still looking through Remus' eyes. I wonder what could have happened...

The Curse again? Remus suggested. If her greatest desire was to raise her son, the Curse might have foiled that somehow. He frowned. I hope not by killing her.

No, that seems a bit improbable, not to mention extreme. Social Services is more likely. Neglect, or lack of proper environment, or

some such. Interesting to know, but not vital – and I have another customer. I'll see you around five. I love you.

Love you too.

With a mental caress, they parted.

After Mrs. Weasley was finished reaming Ron out for running off without permission, she softened and allowed each of the older boys a half hour to do as they liked, while she took the younger ones to the playground. Bill went back to the secondhand store, Percy tagging along, to have a look at some interesting books he'd noticed. Charlie drifted toward Quality Quidditch Supplies, hoping that for once Errol hadn't got lost or blown off course...

"Charlie!" a voice called out, and Tonks came running toward him, grinning. "I got your letter – how are you?"

"Fine," Charlie said, grinning back. It felt surprisingly good to see her again. "You look nice. Did you go on vacation?"

Tonks blushed a little. "No, but don't tell anyone. I just made my skin a little tan so it would look like I did. You know how I can do." Charlie was the only one of her friends who knew she was a Metamorphmagus. The others thought she was preternaturally good at Color-Changing Charms.

"Yeah, I know. Are you getting a broomstick?" Tonks was the only person who knew of Charlie's dream to become a Seeker, a good Seeker. She, in turn, had confided in him her dream of being a killer Beater.

"Mum said maybe. But she had this funny little smile on. So I think so. You?"

Charlie sighed. "I want one, really bad. But..."

Tonks gave him a little smile. "I know. Hey, there's always next year, right?"

“Right.” Charlie smiled back, and for a moment even being too poor to afford a broomstick of his own didn’t seem so hard...

“Charlie!” said the voice he least wanted to hear at that moment.

“Mum wants you,” said the voice he second-least wanted to hear.

“Who’re you?” they said in chorus to Tonks.

Charlie bit his lip, trying not to scream. “Tonks, these are my brothers. One of them is Fred – don’t ask me which one, I don’t know – but whichever one it is, the other one is George.” He looked over at the twins. “This is Tonks. She’s a friend of mine. From school.” He hoped they would notice the emphasis on friend, as in, not girlfriend, but he knew it was probably hopeless.

“Nice to meet you,” the twins said in unison, each extending a hand. Tonks giggled and shook hands with both of them at the same time, using both her own hands.

“Well, I’ll see you on the train, then,” Charlie said, starting off toward the playground.

“See you,” Tonks said, sounding a bit disappointed as she turned to leave.

The twins bracketed him. “So,” said one of them in a speculative voice, and Charlie winced.

“This Tonks you hang around with...”

“The one you’re always talking about...”

“The one you wanted to come and visit...”

“Is a girl?” they finished together.

This is exactly what I was afraid of.

“Who were you talking with outside, Neville?” his gran asked as she walked down Diagon Alley.

“His name was Ron. He was nice.”

“Why did he run away so quickly?”

“His mum wanted him.”

“I see.”

Neville gathered up his courage. “Maybe could he come over and play sometime?” he asked timidly.

Augusta Longbottom sighed. “Perhaps. When you learn to make your bed and clean your room without having to be reminded, and keep track of your own things.”

Perhaps was better than no, Neville reminded himself as he followed his gran down the crowded street. Perhaps was better than no.

He’d work on his room as soon as they got home.

The twins didn’t even wait to get out of the fireplace before they started chanting. “Charlie has a girlfriend, Charlie has a girlfriend...”

“I do not,” Charlie said, blushing. “Shut up.”

“Charlie has a girlfriend, Charlie has a girlfriend...”

“Tonks is just my friend, that’s all.”

“Charlie has a girlfriend, Charlie has a girlfriend...”

“Enough, you two,” Mrs. Weasley said, unloading her packages onto the kitchen table. “Percy, go put these away for me, there’s a dear. Bill, here, take these up to your room. Charlie, these are yours.”

As the oldest boys made their way out of the kitchen, the twins followed them, grinning at each other. They were no sooner out of the kitchen than...

“Charlie has a girlfriend, Charlie has a girlfriend...”

“I said stop!” Mrs. Weasley called after them irritably. There was a whoosh behind her, and the fire in the kitchen fireplace turned green. “Oh, hello, Anita,” she said, turning around.

“Molly,” Mrs. Lovegood greeted her. “I was just checking to see if you were home. Luna has asked if Ginny can stay for lunch – may she?”

“Oh, of course,” Mrs. Weasley said happily. “It’s so nice that the girls have made friends. I’ll expect her home around one, then. Thank you so much...”

“Mum?” Ron said quietly. “Can I go out to the orchard?”

“All right, but be back in half an hour or you get no lunch, Ronald Weasley!” But he could tell from her tone that she didn’t really mean it.

As Ron left the house, he heard, echoing out of an open upstairs window, “Charlie has a girlfriend, Charlie has a girlfriend...”

A muffled explosion cut off the chanting. Ron turned to look. There was a wisp of smoke drifting from the window. He took off running, having no wish to be anywhere near his mother in the mood she was bound to be in for the next ten or fifteen minutes.

Once he got to the orchard, Ron sat down at the foot of a tree, looked down the hill, and sighed.

It’s not fair. Bill and Charlie have friends at school. Fred and George have each other. Even Ginny’s got Luna. Percy used to be my friend, but now he acts all grown-up and doesn’t have time for me any more. There aren’t any families around here with boys my age. And I can’t play with the Muggle kids from the village – they all think I’m weird.

He thought of Neville. Maybe I could play with him. I wish I knew where he lives.

His mind drifted back even further, to a spotty memory of a day two years ago, a day like today, when he had been at the Diagon Alley playground, playing in the sandbox, and another boy and a girl his age had come along... I liked those kids. I wish I knew their names.

He sighed. I guess I just wish I had friends.

Although Ron didn't know it, every one of his three wishes would someday come true.

Remus' shift ended at four-thirty, so that he could go pick up Danger – she was usually too tired to enjoy walking home after a day on her feet. He stayed a little longer today, so that he could finish slicing the last few loaves of Italian bread, but once he was done, he didn't waste any time heading for the door.

“Hoy, John, hold on a second,” Sue called after him. “I have something for you.”

She fumbled in her apron pocket. “You're always cracking jokes. Thought you might like this.”

She tossed him a small plaque, the kind people bought at kiosks in the mall. Remus read the legend engraved on it and chuckled. “Thanks, Sue. I have a friend this'll come in handy for.”

Danger was waiting for him when he pulled up outside the booksellers. “Get held up?” she asked as she got in.

“Just a little. What's that?” She was holding a bag emblazoned with the store name.

“Oh, a little something I picked up on employee discount.” She pulled out a small, square book. “Latin for All Occasions, by Henry Beard. It's fun.” She read a few aloud. “Quomodo cogis comas tuas sic videri? Means ‘How do you get your hair to do that?’ Or Ita erat

quando hic adveni. 'It was that way when I got here.' Oh, here's one for Sirius. Cave canem."

" 'Beware of the dog.' Did you know they found that carved in a pillar outside a home in Pompeii?"

"No, I didn't." Danger flipped a few more pages, chuckling to herself. "License plates, bumper stickers – oh, the seven..." She stopped, staring at the page.

"Something wrong?"

"What's the name of that greasy-haired bloke again, the one who works at Hogwarts, that you and Sirius hate so much?"

"I don't hate him. He hates me. Snape, Severus Snape."

"Are you sure it's Severus?"

"Positive – we were at school together for seven years. Why, is there something about him in the book?"

"Yes – well, sort of."

"What is it?"

Danger hesitated. "We should wait until we're home."

"Why?"

"Because if I tell you now, we'll have an accident."

"That bad?"

"That funny."

"I can take funny. Tell me."

“No.”

“Tell me.”

“No.”

Tell me.

I said no, and I mean it! Not until we're home.

Remus maintained a prim silence until he turned into the driveway of the Den, turned off the truck, and faced Danger. “There,” he said expansively. “Now we're home. Tell me this funny thing that you couldn't tell me while I was driving.”

Danger licked her lips a little nervously. “Have you ever seen the cartoon of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves?”

“Yes.”

“So you remember all the dwarves had names, like Sneezy and Dopey and Doc.”

“Yes.”

“Well, the names are translated into Latin here. And it just so happens that ‘Severus’ is the Latin word...” Danger glanced at the page. “For ‘Grumpy’.”

Remus blinked. “Grumpy.”

“Yes.”

“His name means ‘Grumpy’.”

“Yes.” Danger grinned. “You see why I couldn't tell you when you were driving?”

Yes, Remus had to say mentally, because he was too busy laughing to respond out loud. And I have something to show you. He dug the plaque out of his pocket and handed it to Danger.

“Some mornings I wake up...” Oh, this is too perfect. This is priceless. Danger was laughing as hard as he was now. Their eyes met, and all at once the same idea occurred to both of them.

Are you thinking what I’m thinking?

I think I am. Let’s go run it by Sirius and Letha.

Sirius and Aletha were highly entertained, both by the revelation and the idea. It was put into action immediately.

The next day, someone knocked at the office door of Professor Severus Snape.

“Enter,” he called in annoyance.

The door opened, and a house-elf wearing a horrendous assortment of clothing scuttled in. “Professor Snape, sir, a package is coming, with your name on it.”

A package? I wasn’t expecting anything... “Where is it?”

“Dobby has it here, sir. Where should Dobby put it?”

“I’ll take it.” Snape removed the small package from the house-elf’s hands. “Now get out.”

The little thing disappeared with a loud crack. Snape was too busy examining the parcel to pay much attention. Addressed in a woman’s handwriting, but not one that I know. And with the look of something that has been much handled. Perhaps even sent through the 3M service.

He pulled out his wand and cast a standard threat-determination spell over the package. It blinked for a moment, then glowed blue. The contents were harmless, as far as the spell could establish.

But I have seen things most people would swear were harmless used as murder weapons...

Banishing that thought, he undid the brown paper wrapping. A small book, obviously from a Muggle publisher, met his eyes.

A humor book of Latin phrases. Is this someone's idea of a joke?

A note, also on Muggle paper, was stuck into it, about halfway through the book. Snape pulled it out and opened it.

Dear Professor,

Just a token of our esteem, with warmest wishes for a good school year. Be sure to open the second package after you read page 48.

It was in the same handwriting as the package, and there was no signature.

Second package? Snape picked up the book. There was indeed a second package underneath it, also in brown paper.

Page 48. He opened the book to that page, which he suspected was the one where the note had been stuck. The binding seemed to be broken at that place, and a pair of words on the page had been highlighted in florescent yellow. Naturally, they drew his eyes.

Oh, sweet bloody Merlin on a polka-dotted magic carpet...

He savagely ripped the paper off the second package to find a cheap souvenir plaque, engraved with the words:

Some days I wake up grumpy. Other times I let him sleep.

With an oath, he hurled book and plaque into the fireplace and incinerated them with his wand.

I will find out who did this. If it takes me the rest of my life, I will find out.

“Warmest wishes for a good school year” indeed.

The only thing which comforted him was the knowledge that whoever had done this, it could not have been his old nemeses, the Marauders.

Pettigrew and Potter are dead. Lupin has been missing for years, more than likely dead – quite possibly at the hands of Black. And if Black is wise, he has probably fled the country by now.

Of course, the name Sirius Black and the word “wise” never did go together.

3 September

Dear Mum,

Professor Snape is being horrid to me – I’ve lost twenty points for Gryffindor and I have detention, all from my first class. Did I do something wrong that I don’t know about?

Dora

4 September

Dear Dora,

Severus Snape is horrid to everyone – it’s part of his personality. He may be a little more hostile to you than to most, because you have a connection with someone he truly hated.

Mother

5 September

Dear Mum,

Who?

Dora

6 September

Dear Dora,

Sirius Black was my first cousin, making you his first cousin once removed. He and Severus Snape were in the same year at Hogwarts, and at odds from their first day. I recommend caution.

Mother

P.S. I have recently heard from my nephew's guardians that he is well. I thought you might care to know.

7 September

Dear Mum,

Thanks for the advice. And the news.

Dora

P.S. Does it mean anything if a boy blushes every time he sees me?

P.P.S. Can I have a broomstick for my birthday?

8 September

Dear Dora,

It might. Another one?

Mother

9 September

Dear Mum,

You can always claim you and Dad got your owls crossed and each got me one. I have a friend who needs one really bad. Please?

Dora

10 September

Dear Dora,

The word is "badly". Watch the post.

Mother

P.S. Is this friend a boy?

11 September

Dear Mum,

Thanks a million! And yes, he is, but he's just a friend. Truly he is.

Dora

P.S. What might it mean?

12 September

Dear Dora,

What might what mean?

Mother

P.S. Expect it tomorrow.

13 September

Dear Mum,

Never mind.

Dora

P.S. It came. Charlie says thank you.

14 September

Dear Dora,

Tell him he's welcome.

Mother

P.S. When are you bringing him home so we can meet him?

15 September

Dear Mum,

I told you, he's not my boyfriend!

Dora

P.S. Can he come visit over Christmas?

16 September

Dear Dora,

Of course.

Mother

P.S. Please use a different owl if you answer. This one seems to be worn out for some reason.

(A/N: Henry Beard's book is real, and great fun. Check it out sometime. And yes, that is really what "Severus" means.

This chapter officially cancels my 40-chapter plans – it's going to have to be longer. There was just too much good stuff. :cocks ear for disappointed groans:

OK, after this we start speeding through the years again... so hold onto your hats!)

Chapter 27: Bits and Pieces

15 September

Dear friends,

Severus had the most remarkable thing to show me today – a plaque enchanted so that every time he destroys it, it reconstitutes itself and reappears on his desk. It was sent to him anonymously. I would hate to have to hire another Potions teacher simply because my current one went insane, so any help you can provide would be welcome.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore
16 September

Dear Professor,

We're shocked and hurt that you think we could possibly have had anything to do with such a terrible prank being pulled on Professor Snape, for whom we have the greatest regard.

Yours,

GGL

P.S. To make spells take on the plaque, preface whatever spell you use with the phrase "Molesti Sunt Dei". We recommend you perform it, since having to say this might preclude Professor Snape's insanity by causing him to have a heart attack.

Susan Robertson parked her car in front of the unassuming white house.

73 Crozer Street, his records say. This is the place.

She walked up the front steps, feeling unaccountably nervous.

You're not doing anything illegal – on the contrary, you're preventing crime. One of your co-workers forgot his wallet at your workplace, so you're returning it. You're doing the right thing.

She rang the doorbell. Shrill yells and bass barks heralded the sound from within. After a moment, the door was opened by a tiny girl, who must have stood on tiptoe to reach the handle. "Hi," she said with a shy smile.

"Hi," Sue said back, looking the girl over. She couldn't be more than two, she was utterly darling –

And completely naked. Sue stifled a laugh. "Is your dad home, sweetie?" she asked.

A huge black canine head intruded between them before the girl could reply, gently herding her back into the house. The dog regarded Sue for a moment, then turned and barked three times.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," a female voice called, and the door was abruptly opened quite a bit wider. "Can I help you?" the brunette woman asked.

"I'm looking for John White," Sue said, feeling more nervous still. If this is his wife, I'd love to know how the two of them produced a child with that dark a skin tone... "I'm Sue Robertson, we work together at _"

"Oh, of course!" the woman said, smiling. "Please come in, I'm Kelly, John's wife. Pleased to meet you. Never mind the dog, he's very friendly. Aren't you, Padfoot?" This was addressed to the dog. "You're just a big old stupid puppy, aren't you?"

The dog flopped down where it stood, apparently disdaining to reply, as Sue stepped into the house.

"Meghan Lily, you go upstairs right now and get some clothes on. Ask Neenie to help you. Go on."

The girl scampered quickly up the stairs. "Is she yours?" Sue asked.

"Meghan? No, she's our landlady's daughter, from next door. We have two of our own, plus my sister's boy we took in about a year ago, so Meghan's here almost every day."

John stepped out of the hallway which led to the back of the house. "Hello, Sue," he said with a smile. "Something wrong?"

"You forgot this yesterday," Sue said, holding out the wallet. "I found it under your apron this morning when I tidied up the break room."

"Good Lord." John took the wallet and quickly glanced through it. "Well, everything seems to be here – thank you, Sue, you're a lifesaver."

"He'd forget his head if it wasn't fastened on," Kelly said, shoving her husband affectionately. "Are you in a hurry, or would you care for a cup of tea?"
Thud. Crunch.

"Oooh, and the Ravenclaw Keeper is hit with a Bludger – nice belt by Tonks, the newest Gryffindor Beater – and GRYFFINDORS SCORE!"

Tonks pumped her bat in the air, flew over to high-five Harris, the Chaser who had scored the goal, then went back into the thick of things, always keeping an eye out for Charlie, who was circling the stadium slowly –

No, he was circling fast. Very fast.

"I think Weasley's seen the Snitch!" shouted the commentator. "But here comes Manning, right on his tail –"

Tonks located the nearest Bludger, chased it down, took an instant to aim, and whomped it hard towards the other end of the pitch.

“And Manning is forced to swerve to avoid a Bludger – WEASLEY HAS THE SNITCH! GRYFFINDOR WINS!”

Tonks was sure she'd broken some kind of speed record getting over to Charlie. “You did it!” she shouted to him over the crowd's cheering. “You did it!”

“We did it!” Charlie shouted back, and handed her the Snitch.

Tonks felt herself blush as their hands touched.

“Huh,” Sirius said one morning, perusing the Daily Prophet. “Would you look at that. My mother died.”

Aletha raised her eyebrows. “If I didn't know you and your family, I would think you were just about the most unfeeling, cynical person on the planet.”

“But since you know him, you know he's the most unfeeling, cynical person on the planet,” Remus said, pouring himself a cup of tea.

“Har har,” Sirius said, rolling his eyes.

“Moony, no tease Dadfoot,” Meghan said with a pout. She had combined her original “Dada” with the “Padfoot” that the other cubs used to create her own name for Sirius. Aletha was “Mama Letha” to her, which the other people in Aletha's department at work thought was just adorable.

“Yes tease Dadfoot,” Remus said to her, rubbing her head. “I have to tease your Dadfoot, or his head gets too big, and then he floats away over the trees and scares all the birds.”

The cubs found this highly amusing.

“Does this mean anything legally?” Aletha asked Sirius over the laughter and birdcalls. “She was the last of your immediate family, wasn't she?”

“Well, the house in London is mine now. That’s entailed, it doesn’t go out of the family unless we all die. I’m not sure about the money, I think it depends on if she made a will – and there’s really no one closer than about a third cousin to leave it to, if she wanted to leave it to someone who wasn’t a blood traitor. She might not have bothered, since supposedly I’m not even in the country any more.” The latest rumors placed Sirius and Harry in Australia.

“We should keep an eye on the house,” Danger said. “Just in case we ever need somewhere to go in a hurry.”

“You haven’t dreamed anything, have you?” Aletha asked.

“No, not for a long time. But it’s always a good idea to be prepared.” Fall turned to winter, and Christmas came around in due course. Not that it mattered to Snape, except that the halls of Hogwarts were magically, gloriously, nearly empty for a time, and he could devote himself to the more important things in life, like his studies.

Except when he was invaded.

“Professor Snape, sir!”

It was the wretched house-elf in clothing again. Dumbledore appeared to have conceived a liking for the creature, as it was now his personal messenger. “Yes, what do you want?”

“Professor Dumbledore says he is wanting to see you in his office as soon as you is having the time.”

Which, of course, meant now. “I will come immediately.”

“Thank you, sir!” The house-elf disappeared, and Snape got up slowly, wondering idly what wizarding household had finally wearied of the small annoying thing and dismissed it.

“Candy cane,” he said to the gargoyle, and ascended to the Headmaster’s office.

“Severus, do come in. Have a seat.”

He is never this polite except when he wants something.

“I was wondering how you plan to deal with the rash of fights which Slytherins appear to have been instigating.”

“Three fights in the first term of school hardly constitutes a rash, Headmaster. I have spoken to the students involved, and they have assured me it will not happen again. Also, according to them, it was the Gryffindors who started the fights, specifically a pair of second-years – ”

“Headmaster!” a voice shouted from a portrait on the wall. It was a witch all in blue, looking quite alarmed. “It’s Peeves – he’s in the Ravenclaw common room – terrorizing the students – ”

“Will you excuse me for a moment, Severus?” Dumbledore said, getting up quickly.

“Certainly, Headmaster.”

Dumbledore hurried from the room, and Snape was left to his own devices. Fawkes the phoenix watched him for a moment, then made a crooning sound and closed his eyes. The Sorting Hat sat on a high shelf, as it always did. Various small pieces of equipment made small pings or chuffling noises to themselves. The portraits snored in their frames. An owl tapped at the window, which was half occluded by snow.

I should let the creature in. It would not do to have the Headmaster’s post interrupted because the owl carrying it froze.

Snape opened the window, and the owl flapped in with a hoot of thanks. It deposited the parcel it was carrying on Dumbledore’s desk, then soared back out the window, probably on its way to the Owlery.

Snape glanced idly at the package, then did a classic double-take.

I have seen that handwriting before.

But where?

It niggled at him all through the rest of his meeting with Dumbledore, all through his lunch and his afternoon, until finally he opened a drawer of his desk and was confronted with the taunting note that had accompanied that blasted plaque, which Dumbledore had finally rid him of, without telling him how, in mid-September.

Whoever did this to me, Dumbledore knows her. Or, more likely, them.

And receives Christmas packages from them.

I do not like this.

But there was nothing he could do about it.

Except to watch, and keep accumulating information.

“All right, gentlemen. Your papers have 30 problems on them. The challenge – finish all 30 in three minutes or less. A bonus goes to the first finisher and the wizard with the most correct answers. Salute your opponent.”

Harry and Draco tapped their pencil points together, eyes locked.

“On your marks.”

The points touched paper.

“Get set.”

Both boys tensed.

“Go!” Danger said, pressing the button on the kitchen timer beside her.

Turning classes into competitions was one of the best ideas I've had. These boys are fiercely competitive. This gives them a way to battle each other without resorting to physical violence every day.

It's only every other day now.

Hermione, on the other side of the table from Danger, gave the boys an amused look, then returned to her own paper. She was so good at anything academic that she had been banned from the competitions, which suited her just fine.

I suppose we could send them to school. But it would be hard on them. School would, of necessity, be out-of-den time, and that's a lot to ask a five-year-old – to assume another name and face for six to eight hours a day.

Besides, they're all three so bright. They're probably at least a year ahead of most curricula at this point. No, I think this is probably the smartest thing to do, is keep teaching them here at home.

The only problem is, they might get a kind of "us-against-the-world" mentality. At this point in their lives, it's probably wise for them to think that way... but they shouldn't go around treating everyone they don't know as a potential enemy. No matter how true it is.

I just wish they had some friends outside the Pack. Children friends.

"Done!" Draco said, putting down his pencil.

"Nuts," Harry muttered, slapping his own down. "I only had one more."

"Let me see those," Danger said, collecting both sheets. "Ah, Draco, you were going too fast. You missed one. Harry, yours is all correct. Which means, we have two winners! Shake hands and tell each other good job."

The handshake was overly firm and emphasized on both sides, making Neenie roll her eyes and murmur, "Boys," in a world-weary voice.

May was warm and sunny, much to Snape's annoyance. Sunny days tended to make his classes more difficult, since students wanted to be outdoors, or, lacking that, somewhere with a window. Consequently, the Potions classroom was one of their least favorite places, and they daydreamed, made mistakes, or out-and-out cheeked him.

"I'm sorry, Professor," said the red-faced Gryffindor girl. "I knocked it over by accident, I swear."

"This is the fourth such 'accident' in two weeks, Miss Tonks. I will be speaking to your Head of House about this."

The girl blushed even redder, matching her partner's hair. Said partner was giving Snape the proverbial look that could kill.

"Mr. Weasley, mind your own cauldron," Snape barked, pointing at the thing, which was boiling and perilously close to overflowing.

All in all, he was quite glad when the bell rang and the Gryffindors charged out of the dungeon.

I really should speak to Minerva anyway. She has been docking points from Slytherins entirely too much lately. I think she fears we may win the House Cup again.

Consequently, he made his way up the stairs to Professor McGonagall's office and knocked on the door. "Come in," her voice called.

Snape opened the door to be greeted by a peal of laughter. Aletha Freeman sat in one of the chairs facing McGonagall's desk, face alight with merriment. "Professor, thank you so much for telling me," she said happily.

“Any time, Ms. Freeman, any time.” McGonagall smiled predatorily. “Give everyone my regards.”

“I will. Have a good afternoon. Oh, hello, Professor Snape. I was just leaving.”

“Indeed,” Snape said in his flattest voice, watching her close the door behind her. “Minerva, I wish to speak to you about Tonks and Weasley. They were positively disrespectful in class today, and Weasley endangered everyone when his cauldron almost boiled over while he was busy glaring at me...”

“Professor McGonagall told me the most interesting story today,” Aletha announced at dinner. “Something about once penalizing a trio of Gryffindor boys for a double offense – first, having an illegal pet in the school, and second, getting said pet, and themselves, totally and utterly drunk.”

Sirius buried his face in his hands. “I hoped she would have forgotten about that,” he said in a muffled voice. “Especially now that she knows the dog was me.”

“She said, ‘twenty points from Gryffindor for each of you drunken fools,’ ” Remus recalled. “She never could figure out why the counters dropped by eighty instead of sixty.”

“Oh, I have some good news,” Sirius said, after the laughter had died down. “My publishers decided I’m worth a larger audience. They’re sending my manuscripts through to their Muggle affiliates.” His second novel, *Long Journey Home*, had been published the past November, and he had a third one in the works, tentatively titled *Wait for Me*.

“They have Muggle affiliates?” Danger asked in disbelief.

“Half the good fantasy in Britain’s written by wizards and witches,” Aletha said. “That’s why it seems so real. Congratulations, love.”

“You could be selling my books by August, Danger. And if you ever have customers who want something signed...”

“Glory hound,” Danger said, pretending to throw a piece of bread at Sirius. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

Snape was getting ready for bed when he recalled something odd.

Minerva told the Freeman woman to give “everyone” her regards. Who is “everyone”? She has only the one daughter...

She probably means those dratted Muggle neighbors the woman’s always dragging around.

But why would Minerva McGonagall be sending her regards to Muggles?

Add it to the list of oddities, and keep watching, Severus, keep watching...

Being almost six, Neenie found, had distinct advantages.

She was taller than she had ever been. That meant she could reach higher, and that meant several things. First, she could reach more books without needing a stool. Second, she could get herself and the boys a snack, occasionally when Danger or Sirius wasn’t looking.

And third, for the first time in her life, she could really climb trees.

There were three trees in the yard surrounding the Den, one in front, two in back. One of the ones in back was fairly low and gnarled, and she’d been able to get up a short ways in that last summer. Now she could climb all over it, and she dismissed it within the first week of summer as ‘baby stuff’.

The other tree in the back yard was nicely proportioned for climbing in, but she had never been able to reach the first limb without Harry or Draco to lift her up to it. Her new height allowed her to jump and catch hold of it. From there, she walked her legs up the tree trunk, swung herself over the limb, and sat on it. And then she was in a world of her own, where she could see everything and no one could see her.

Remus taught her how to tie a knot that would hold, and every fine morning after breakfast, she would tie a bundle of books together with a rope and lash the other end to her belt. Once she had established herself in her favorite sitting-place, about halfway up the big tree, she would haul the books up behind her, and no one would see her until lunchtime.

“She’s getting exercise, she’s reading and improving her mind, and she’s outdoors in this gorgeous weather. What more could we ask?” Danger said.

The boys enjoyed tree-climbing as well, but they were more interested in the process than the result. Neenie had a prior claim on the big tree in the back, so the tree out front became the boys’ tree, and the White boy and the Gray boy became neighborhood business as they chased each other up and down and around and around the tree.

Meghan, as usual, was put out that her brothers and sister were doing something she couldn’t. Not even graduating from her parents’ bed to the big bed in the cubs’ room, on her third birthday, could appease her. She distinguished herself highly at the playground, on the jungle gym, and indoors on the bookshelves (to Aletha’s dismay), but the trees were still, literally, beyond her grasp. So she would sit at the bottom of Hermione’s tree and play in the grass, or dig in the dirt in the little patch of garden that Aletha had given her.

Sometimes Neenie would come down to the first big limb and read a story to Meghan from there. The boys would hear her voice echoing around the house and come running back to listen too, and Harry’s presence would summon up his snake friends like magic (which it probably was, the adults admitted), and Hermione’s words would have a background of hissing to them as Harry translated the story.

“I can’t decide if it’s scary or cute,” Danger told Remus as they watched the tableau through the back door. Draco sat cross-legged with Meghan in his lap, both of them looking up at Neenie and listening raptly. Harry was lying on his back with two snakes curled on his chest, his mouth moving as he repeated the story in Parseltongue.

“Go for cute,” Remus advised. “Easier on the brain that way.”

Because it happens so much, if it scares me, I’m going to burn out, right?

Got it in one.

Danger sighed. Tell me again that everything will be all right.

Remus pulled her close to him, feeling the flutter of her breath against his side. Everything will – eventually – be all right.

Thank you. You may kiss me now.

And I was wondering just the other day where Neenie gets her imperious ways.

I wonder if this classifies as a miracle – two whole years without a new Weasley at Hogwarts. I am certain that no one will ever be able to irk me quite as much as that red-haired twit and his color-changing sidekick...

Severus Snape, checking his class roster for the start of a new school year, was unaware of the existence of two eight-year-old bundles of dynamite, more commonly known as Fred and George Weasley.

The reverse, unfortunately for the Potions Master, was not true.

“Mis-ter Weasley!” a voice boomed. “What are you doing?”

“Just stirring my cauldron, Professor,” whined another voice.

“You’re stirring too fast. Let me show you.” A hand seized the stirring stick. “You must stir slowly. And gently. And with total concentration...”

“And then, while he’s not looking, boom!” said George Weasley exultantly.

“Yeah, boom!” Fred Weasley agreed, pulling off the voluminous cloak he was wearing. “Fireworks everywhere!”

“What kind of potion should we do it on?” George asked. “D’you think Swelling Solution would be good?”

Fred considered a moment, then nodded. “Especially if we get some on him. Make his nose even bigger than it already is!”

The twins had been using Professor Snape as their villain of choice ever since Bill’s first year at Hogwarts. He was ugly, mean, and unfair – what more could be desired in a villain? Moreover, they would someday get to meet him in person, and play real tricks on him.

Glancing at George, Fred saw that, as usual, his twin was thinking along the same lines he was – George’s face sported the same beatific smile Fred could feel on his own.

“So what should we do our first day?” Fred asked. “To make our arrival a memorable one?”

“Wake up the giant squid?” George suggested. “Drop a bag of Dungbombs under the Slytherin table?” Neither boy had any uncertainty about where they wanted to be Sorted, and Slytherin wasn’t it.

“Hmm.” Fred considered. “Dungbombs would be good, except we have to eat there too. And the giant squid’s kind of risky. What about...”

The two continued their planning, unaware of the listening ears just outside their door.

“Any post today?” Aletha asked as she came into the front room one rainy October afternoon.

“Just a letter for you,” Sirius said, holding it over her head. “Kiss me, then you get it.”

“I’ll kick you in the shin, how’s that?”

“You can do that if you kiss me first.”

“I was going to kiss you anyway, you idiot.”

“Eeewwww,” was the expressed opinion of all four cubs.

“You don’t have to watch if you don’t like it,” Sirius said. “Shoo, go on.”

“Oh, it’s from my aunt!” Aletha exclaimed as she opened the letter.

“Your aunt? The American one?” Danger asked, coming in.

“I only have one,” Aletha said, swiping at Danger with the letter. “She’s still unmarried, still living in the same city, wants to hear from me – and she says if I ever want to come and visit her, with some of my ‘young friends’, we’re welcome. Any time, and as many as I want, she says. Love, Aunt Amy.”

“You have an aunt in America?” Remus asked.

“Oh, yes, didn’t you know my father was American? He met my mother on a student exchange program at Oxford and decided to marry her and stay in England. And then they had me, and I turned out magic – which I’m fairly sure my aunt does not know,” Aletha confessed. “And I’m not sure I want to be the one to tell her. My father must have sent her the Box 313 address before...” Aletha sighed. Her mother had died of cancer during Aletha’s final year at Hogwarts, and her father had not contacted her since.

Sirius embraced her. “I love you, Letha,” he reminded her, stroking her hair. “We all love you.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, attaching himself to the outside of the hug. Meghan slithered between her parents as Draco and Hermione followed their brother’s lead. “Love you, Letha.”

“Thanks,” Aletha whispered into Sirius’ ear. “Though I would feel better if you weren’t standing on my robes.”

“Sorry.”

“Tonks?”

“Mmm?”

“Is your family doing anything special over Christmas?”

“Nothing more special than usual. Why?”

“Well...” Charlie blushed slightly. “I just got a letter from Mum. And she says she’ll meet the three of us at the train station.”

“Three?” Tonks asked. “Is Bill bringing someone home with him?” Then she caught on. “Oh.”

“That’s if you want to come, of course.” Charlie blushed harder and started talking very fast. “You don’t have to, you might not like it, it’s probably not what you’re used to, and my family might drive you bonkers, they certainly do me...”

Tonks laughed and pushed him down into an armchair. “Of course I want to come. And I want to go bonkers over your family. I love little kids.”

“You say that now,” Charlie said in a voice filled with experience. “You won’t after vacation.”
Christmastime again.

Peace on earth I could deal with, but good will to men is not my department.

Snape stepped into the entrance hall and almost lost his balance.

Damn poltergeist's been icing the floor again. He pulled his wand out and melted a path for himself. Of course, this meant that there was water all over. Still, wet feet were preferable to falling every two steps.

The outer doors opened and a mountain of fur stormed in.

And fell flat on its back. Snape was certain he felt the castle shake on its foundations.

Hagrid, in a hurry. Whereas I am not...

Yielding to one of his rare generous impulses, he melted his way to the gamekeeper's side. "Do you need help?" he asked.

"Oh, hullo, Professor – if yeh could just have a look round an' see where the res' o' these went, tha'd be great." Hagrid displayed a handful of small carved pieces of wood. "Christmas presents," he said in a tone of great confidentiality. "Made 'em meself, I did. For some kids I know. Gotta get 'em upstairs before the owl goes."

Snape picked up two carved letter R's and an O and handed them to Hagrid, then looked behind him to find a C and a Y. "Is that all?"

"Er... yep, that's all of 'em. Thanks, Professor." Hagrid got back to his feet and carefully picked his way toward the marble staircase.

"You're quite welcome," Snape said under his breath, lest anyone hear him. He started walking toward the kitchens, with the letters teasing his brain. R, R, O, C, and Y...

"Oy, Professor!" Hagrid called from the top of the stairs. "I'm missin' one – you see an A anywheres about?"

"Accio A," Snape muttered, and the small wooden carving flew into his hand. He tossed it to Hagrid, who caught it easily and waved his thanks.

R, R, O, C, Y, and A. There must be more than one name, or else it is unconscionably long and quite strange.

On impulse, when he got back to his office, Snape copied the letters down onto a scrap of parchment, which he used as a bookmark later that evening and promptly forgot about.

(A/N: For everyone who asked about prophecy, one is coming up next chapter, guaranteed! (Translation: it was supposed to be this chapter, but it ran too long.)

Note to everyone: There is now a link on my bio page to a webpage that shows the Latin names of the Seven Dwarves. For everyone who asked me if I made up the thing about Severus.

Oh yes: "Molesti sunt dei" translates roughly as "The Marauders are gods". This was inspired by emikae's gloriously and insanely funny fic "Correspondence". Go read it now if you haven't already.

Love to everyone, and expect the next chapter, "Two and Two Together", soon, since I managed to write half of it under the mistaken impression that it belonged in this chapter!)

Chapter 28: Two and Two Together

“Go on, Reggie, you run ahead. You too, Jamie,” Aletha Freeman said, laughing as the two little boys sped off toward the doors, clumsy in their coats and boots, but each still trying to outrun the other.

If I wanted to see small children, I would work at a primary school. Must she haul those brats here every week?

Severus Snape was not in a good mood.

At least the girls seem able to control themselves. Freeman's daughter and the older girl whose hand she was holding were walking beside the Muggle couple with Freeman in a civilized manner. And I will not personally have to deal with any of them until they are old enough to understand adult conversation.

The older girl looked at Snape curiously and said something to her father, something which made him laugh aloud.

So glad I could provide amusement for you, Snape grumbled mentally, while also registering the fact that the man's laugh was familiar.

Yet another entry on my list of things that are not as they should be. I have never known a Muggle well enough to know what his laughter sounded like. So the man is not a Muggle. But neither is he anyone I recognize by sight...

The party was out of the entrance hall by now, headed across the great expanse of lawn, where some students were having a snowball fight. Even from this distance, Snape could see the blazing red hair of the Weasley brothers and the bright blue of the Tonks girl, to whom Freeman's enormous dog was currently giving an enthusiastic greeting.

So it seems I am not the only one so favored by this animal.

The sight of his problem student floundering in the snow, pinned down by the huge black thing, raised his spirits immensely. Snape made his way to the kitchens feeling almost cheerful.

“Is that Professor Grumpy?” Neenie asked Remus curiously, looking at Snape.

Remus couldn't keep himself from laughing, especially since Snape's face, as it so often did, certainly warranted that name at this moment. He nodded to her rather than speak aloud, since Severus would almost without a doubt recognize his speaking voice.

Minerva claims she recognized my laughter, but she already suspected who I might be. Severus, as far as we know, has no idea.

And may he never.

Danger surprised Remus on his birthday with a truly enormous book entitled *The Lives of the Hogwarts Founders*, which he had been wanting ever since it had come out the previous year. He wasn't so much surprised by the fact that she had bought it for him as by the fact that she had rigged it to fall out of the ceiling directly above his face as he woke up. Luckily for both of them, she had securely attached it to a bungee cord, so that it snapped back about six inches from him.

Just testing your reflexes, dear, was her last audible comment before he got a hold of her.

After they had both recovered, they came down to breakfast, and Remus read snippets aloud from the book throughout the meal.

“ ‘Each of the Founders of Hogwarts had a talent for an unusual sort of wandless magic. Best known, of course, is the ability of Salazar Slytherin to speak snake language, or Parseltongue, a talent which legend says will be passed down to his true heirs throughout time.’ ”

Harry looked apprehensive. He knew all about Slytherin House and its reputation. “Does that mean I have to be a Slytherin?” he asked tentatively.

“No,” Sirius said emphatically. “Absolutely not, Harry. You may be a Parselmouth, but that doesn’t make you Slytherin’s heir. Slytherin was a mean b – ”

“Sirius!”

“Bloke,” Sirius concluded without missing a beat, winking at Aletha. “He wanted to keep magic in all-magic families. And he was willing to hurt people, even kill them, to enforce that. Doesn’t sound much like Harry, now does it?” he asked the other cubs, who shook their heads. “So you have nothing to worry about, Greeneyes. Even if you were descended from Salazar Slytherin, you’re nothing like him, and that’s what matters.”

“Okay,” Harry said cheerfully, accepting his godfather’s explanation and a hug at the same time.

“Go on and play, you four, I’ll clear the table,” Danger said, and the cubs scurried from the room with alacrity, taking full advantage of the rare respite from their usual chore.

“ ‘Helga Hufflepuff was renowned for her talents with plants,’ ” Remus went on. “ ‘Hogwarts legend credits her with planting the snowdrops that still cover the school’s lawns every spring. Another story claims that she once made her enemy’s wand sprout flowers in his hand during a duel, incapacitating him. It was she who insisted that the grounds not be entirely cleared of forest, and she was respected and allowed safe passage by all the creatures of the forest, even the notoriously ethnocentric centaurs.’ ”

“Wish I was Hufflepuff’s heir,” Sirius said, putting his feet up on the table for a brief moment before Aletha firmly removed them with one of her own. “Then I could have sprouted Snivelly’s wand in our sixth year, when he hexed that poor first year from behind. Remember that, Moony?”

Remus sighed. “Padfoot, you thought it was funny.”

“At the time.” Sirius waved his hand, dismissing such trifles.

“What I remember is how James looked,” Remus said. “He probably could have set the castle on fire with his eyes.”

Sirius nodded. “He was scary when he got mad. Him and Lily both. Harry’s going to be terrifying, if he got even a fraction of their tempers.”

Remus continued. “ ‘Rowena Ravenclaw was a noted Healer, with her greatest asset being her ability to wandlessly diagnose and treat some ailments that were otherwise resistant or entirely unresponsive to treatment. However, use of this ability tired her greatly, so that she could only use it in times of great need, and then only a few times before she was exhausted. Her greatest achievement was healing an entire class of students who had been badly burned by a rogue dragon, but she needed two months to recover from this, and her hair remained white for the rest of her life.’ ”

“Small price to pay,” Aletha said quietly, with the bleakness in her eyes she only got when she was thinking of her mother. Her parents had kept her mother’s illness from her, not wanting to interrupt her studies, until it was too late for Aletha to do anything but say goodbye.

“ ‘Godric Gryffindor could wandlessly control fire, and was never burned, not even when he was asleep or unconscious. Some accounts state that he juggled balls of fire at the opening ceremonies of Hogwarts. One tale (which is unsupported by any other source, scholars note, and may have been invented in later years) has him burning Slytherin’s wand to ash when Slytherin tried to expel a Muggleborn student by force, leading to the historic breach between the Founders.’ ”

Aletha’s face changed to considering. “Something wrong?” Danger asked.

“Just a random thought.” Aletha sighed. “It’s gone. Never mind.”

Remus flipped some pages. “Ah, Founders’ families. Slytherin had two sons – one of them went with him when he left, one stayed with

the other Founders. Hufflepuff had one son, Ravenclaw had three daughters – one a Squib, oddly enough – and Gryffindor had a son and a daughter.”

“Anything about present-day heirs?” Danger asked curiously.

“No. Apparently the records are sketchy for the next few centuries. So there’s no way to tell for sure if there are any heirs of the Founders left.”

“Just have to watch the cubs for unusual abilities,” Sirius said.

Aletha sighed. “Other unusual abilities.”

A silence fell as the Pack thought about the fact that one of their cubs might indeed be an heir of a Founder – and not the Founder they would have liked.

“Maybe Harry’s descended from Slytherin’s good son,” Danger said, trying to keep the conversation light and aware that she was failing dismally.

“It doesn’t matter,” Remus said firmly. “Remember, Sirius? Not abilities, but choices.”

Sirius groaned. “I got so sick of hearing that.”

“Translation for the mundanes?” Aletha asked.

“Every time we would get in trouble and have to go to Dumbledore’s office,” Remus recalled, “he would tell us that it was not our abilities that were getting us in trouble, but our choices about what to do with them.”

“And he was right,” Sirius said. “We were choosing to do things that had a high probability of getting us caught.”

Aletha slapped him lightly on the top of the head, and the conversation turned to reminiscences.

April was ushered in by a truly remarkable April Fool's Day, since the cubs were now old enough to think up and carry out pranks on their own, and took full advantage of the fact. The adults had been planning to initiate them into pranking over the course of the next year, and were somewhat surprised that the cubs had anticipated them.

"Surprised, but proud," as Sirius said. "So proud."

Harry's snake friend Siss enjoyed the day wholeheartedly. Her friend Hesseh swore off humans entirely.

The full moon in April fell on the 6th, and after a rousing game of "chase the werewolf", during which Moony and Padfoot both managed to fall down the stairs and come up unhurt, the Pack went into den, sleeping in their usual untidy piles in front of the fireplace.

Danger had trouble getting to sleep, even with everyone else around her to encourage her. Something feels odd about tonight. And not in a good way.

When she finally did get to sleep, she realized what was going on.

Oh, fudge. Feetie fudge. I had kind of hoped I wouldn't have any more of these. And this one feels big...

I have been waiting, said a mock-irritable voice, for an hour and a quarter. Did you drink too much tea before bed?

No, I was just nervous. And now I know why.

Well, since you're here, "once more into the breach, dear friends, once more"?

I think that's "unto".

We can look it up in the morning.

Hand in insubstantial hand, they plunged into the maelstrom of images and sounds, and waited for the words to come.

Once a friend, and once a foe,
Your dwelling place has come to know,
A third shall come, invade your Den,
And you shall see it ne'er again.
Th'invader is well-known to all,
Nor friend nor foe you would him call,
And though the wolf defeat him may,
Still cubs, adults, must all away.
Be answer to a lady's prayer,
The new world seek, feel no despair,
For only half a year shall fly
Ere you this isle again draw nigh.
A new Den make, in village small,
New names and faces give you all,
Uphold the lonely one and find
A friend and helper, sharp of mind.
The odd one of that family, too,
And moon-called friend join unto you,
And thus the pack begins to meet
Which one day shall the dark defeat.

Danger grimaced. "I do not like the look of the fourth line. At all."

"Neither do I," Remus said grimly, passing a copy over to Aletha and Sirius. "Matter of fact, I don't like the look of the first eight lines. An invader, whom I'm apparently supposed to face, and no matter if I win or lose, we have to leave. Leave and never come back."

Aletha closed her eyes and pressed her face against Sirius' shoulder for a moment, then emerged with a look of determination. "Right. Was there any time sense on this? Are we going to have to get out tomorrow?"

"Sorry, nothing," Danger said, suddenly acutely aware of how much she loved her Den, how much she would hate to lose it. "This one's open-ended. Could happen next week, or next year."

"I don't think so," Sirius said. "You haven't had one in a while, now suddenly you do. That argues it's going to happen fairly soon."

"Good point." Remus studied the parchment in his hand. "So we're supposed to go to a new world for six months, then come back here, find a new Den in a small village, establish new identities for everyone..."

"Wait, that's not what it says," Aletha said. "It's not 'a' new world, it's 'the' new world. That has a specific meaning."

"The New World – America – " Sirius snapped his fingers. "Got it. 'Be answer to a lady's prayer' – we're supposed to go visit your aunt, Letha. That's what that is." Amy Freeman had written three more times since her first letter the previous October, and always closed with an entreaty for Aletha and her daughter to come and visit, and bring her friends if she liked.

Danger nodded. "That makes sense. And if we go Muggle-style, by airplane, and don't do any magic, the magical folks might not catch onto us until too late – and we haven't done anything wrong in the Muggle world, so they won't be looking for us."

“Best of both worlds,” Remus said, smiling at his wife. “But I’m wondering who this invader is supposed to be. Someone we know, and someone we’re divided over in some way. Maybe someone with ambiguous loyalties...” He trailed off, with a look of mingled comprehension and distaste.

“You’re thinking what I’m thinking, aren’t you?” Sirius said.

“Snape?”

“That’s the man.”

“Well, if Severus Snape is going to find us, I’m all for leaving,” Aletha said with a weak chuckle. “That man’s face could sour milk.”

“The important thing is that now we know,” Danger said. “Should we tell the cubs?”

Sirius glanced down the hallway to the den room, where Harry, Hermione, Draco, and Meghan still lay asleep and limp in a tangle of limbs. “No. Not yet. If we tell them now, they’ll have time to think about it, and they might get scared. If we wait and surprise them with it, it’s like an adventure.”

“All right,” Remus said, standing up. “We’ve probably done as much as we can with this right now, and it is a weekday. Come on, ladies, time to get ready for work.” After all, dreams or not, life goes on.

However much you might want it to stand still. Climbing the stairs, Danger sighed deeply. Damn it, Remus, we’ve been happy here. We’ve had five really good years. Why can’t they just leave us alone?

If you wanted to be left alone, you should never have got into this in the first place.

True enough. But once I was in, I wasn’t about to get out.

I remember. “Don’t think you’re leaving me behind.”

And you didn't, and you never have.

And I never will.

The Lupins took a moment out of their preparations to reaffirm their love physically. Mental contact was nice, but it only went so far.

April, May, and June were unusually warm and sunny that year, as if to give the Pack as much enjoyment as possible in their last months in their Den. They went often to Hogsmeade, where Harry and Draco had broomstick races, which neither of them could consistently win, though Harry won a bit more often. Both boys also enjoyed doing tricks on their brooms and giving their Pack-mothers heart palpitations. Hermione was a decent flyer, but didn't care to race or do tricks, for which Danger was decidedly thankful.

Meghan, under Hermione's tutelage, learned to read, and learned all by herself how to climb the cabinets in the kitchen to get at the cookies. Harry taught her to fly without holding onto her broom, and Draco taught her to fib with a straight face – though his tricks very seldom fooled any of their Pack-parents, all the cubs knew that someday they would have to face the rest of the world.

Sirius showed all of the cubs how to throw a ball straight and hard, and the older three learned from Remus where to hit someone if they ever truly needed to defend themselves. Danger taught them all how to knit, as her mother had taught her. Harry and Hermione had joined Draco in piano lessons when Aletha felt they were ready, and she had added basic singing tutoring to that as time went by. Draco was hoping for a recorder for his birthday.

And so their lives went, pleasantly enough, except for the shadow the adults knew was creeping closer by the day – the shadow of upheaval in their lives, of leaving their Den for good...

At last. The end of the year. They all leave tomorrow.

Severus Snape was feeling so good, he had actually emerged from the dungeons to enjoy the evening.

But, of course, solitude is too much to hope for.

A pair of students was sitting along the edge of the lake. They were unaware of his presence, and they were probably under the impression that they were talking quietly. Unfortunately, no one had ever told them that sound carries well around water.

Snape was about to leave when a fragment of what the girl was saying caught his ear.

She cannot just have said what I thought she said. It was my imagination.

Still, he was intrigued enough to stand still for another moment...

"Draco Malfoy?" the boy repeated loudly, and the girl shushed him. "You're telling me you know where he is?" he said a little more quietly, but still perfectly audibly.

"Yes, but you can't tell anyone!" the girl said anxiously. "No one, not even your brothers, not even your mum, understand?"

"Of course – Tonks, how long have you known?"

Yes. I too would like to know how long you have known. Snape dropped into a crouch so he would be less noticeable and strained his ears, afraid to get closer for fear the children would hear him moving.

"Years, a couple of years, and my mum said never to tell anyone, but Charlie, I had to tell someone – please, please, I trust you, please don't tell anyone, or my mum will know it was me!"

"Don't worry," the boy said in a soothing tone. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. I promise. Swear on my family name. So, where is he?"

The girl looked around fearfully, missing Snape since he was crouched beside a clump of bushes, then, to Snape's annoyance, leaned over and whispered something into the boy's ear. Whatever it was, it delighted him. He laughed aloud. "No, really? Under everyone's noses! And no one else knows? That's great!"

“Well, I’m pretty sure Professor Dumbledore knows,” the girl said. “And Hagrid, too – they always go to visit him. And possibly Professor McGonagall – she’s got a new photograph on her desk, but the frame’s always empty when I’m in there. I think she’s got it charmed so only she can see it.”

“Handy, that,” the boy said, getting up. “Let’s go in, Tonks, it’s getting chilly.”

“One thing I’ve always wondered, though,” floated back to Snape on the evening breeze as the students wandered toward the castle, “is why they call him Reggie. I mean, you can’t get Reggie out of a name like – you know.”

“Well, they couldn’t keep that name. It is kind of conspicuous.”

“True, but you’d think they’d try to give him something a little more like what he’s used to – maybe call him Daniel or David, at least keep the same first letter...”

Very slowly, Snape straightened up, his mind buzzing.

So.

A teenaged girl has accomplished a task that has baffled the best minds of magical Britain for nearly three years.

And given me a tantalizing half-answer. Reggie. Where have I heard the name Reggie?

He walked slowly back to his quarters, thinking, searching his memory. Finally, he gave up and decided to read instead. Perhaps while I am thinking of something else, it will return to me.

He pulled a book off his shelf that he had not read in several months and opened it. A slip of parchment fluttered to the floor.

What... ah, yes, the letters Hagrid dropped last Christmas. He picked it up and glanced at it, remembering. R, R, O, C, Y, A.

Tonks' voice echoed in his head.

“And Hagrid, too – they always go to visit him...”

R, O, C, and A – all could be from the name Draco. And he would be the age to enjoy a puzzle in the shape of his name. But the extra R and the Y do not fit the pattern...

He racked his brain for details that he might have missed, and found two. Hagrid mentioned “kids”, as in more than one child. And when I picked them up, the two R's were together. So perhaps they are both part of another name. R, R, and Y...

As he had expected, his mind, confronted with this new problem, instead reminded him of where he had heard the name “Reggie” –

“Go on, Reggie, you run ahead. You too, Jamie,” Aletha Freeman said, laughing as the two little boys sped off...

Two boys. She always has two boys with her. Two boys and a girl, all of the same age. The correct age for one of them to be Draco Malfoy, Draco Regulus Malfoy, which would account for “Reggie” –

And another boy of that age, called “Jamie”, with a name including RRY –

No, that is a supposition. The name could be the girl's...

But even as Snape thought that, the answer struck him, with almost the force of a physical blow, making him gasp aloud.

Harry.

The name is Harry.

Harry Potter.

“Jamie”, of course, after his father James. Even dead, the man haunts me.

But Sirius Black –

Snape swore bitterly. Was Aletha Freeman’s boyfriend, you fool! She would have done anything for him – she named her damn dog after him!

He swore again as he realized something else. She bore his child. That girl was never adopted, she looks exactly like her mother. So it’s no wonder she’s also raising the children he stole!

No, she’s not. I must not jump to conclusions. There are two other people involved. A woman and a man, supposedly the parents of the children, and supposedly Muggles. But I have established that I know the man from somewhere...

Yes, and Minerva told Freeman to give “everyone” her regards. But the children would be unlikely to know her, or care. And Black by himself, if Freeman is in fact hiding him, does not constitute an “everyone”. So who...

Snape closed his eyes, called up his memory of the man who always accompanied Freeman, and took a good look at him, at the way he moved and held himself. He will have changed his face, but not the way he walks and stands...

His memory was not quite photographic, but it was excellent, the trained memory of a spy, who lives and dies by details. In this case, it sufficed.

Lupin. Snape snarled to himself. I should have realized long ago. Potter and Black could always talk Lupin into anything. Black probably convinced him he was innocent, they stole the Potter boy and subverted Freeman together, and they’ve been hiding together for the last – five years, is it now? And sending me insults by mail; that plaque was exactly the kind of thing they would, and could, do.

And somehow, they got their hands on Draco Malfoy. Possibly through a family connection with Black, that would explain how the Tonks girl knows – since she mentioned her mother also as knowing –

He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. This is all supposition. I must have fact before I can do anything.

But I cannot go to the Headmaster with this. He is part of it. That parcel at Christmas two years ago, from the same people who sent me that infuriating package...

I must investigate this myself. I must see what I can find out.

And when I have my proof, I will bring them down.

He poured himself a shot of firewhiskey and lifted it ironically to the ceiling.

Here's to you, James Potter. As I lay plans to save your son by getting your best friends arrested.

He drank the liquor off in one gulp, enjoying the burning sensation in his mouth and throat.

Poetic justice does exist after all.

(A/N: As I said, this one's up pretty fast – hope you like! And yes, it is just a tad of a cliffhanger, but I think we all know where it's going...

Don't you just love getting flamed for stupid things? Mr. Borg (or Ms. Borg), thank you for your input. Is there anything around that you do like? (For the record, since I have deleted the review, he/she reviewed chapter 1 and told me that Danger was a stupid idea for a name, and that I should remove "Living with Danger" from FFN.)

Love to everyone, and check my favorite stories page, it's been updated again! Love ya StB!)

Chapter 29: Three Sides Around

Snape was up early the next morning, pacing and planning.

Where would they be likely to hide?

Their story – they being Lupin and whoever this woman is – consists of being Freeman's neighbors, Muggles with magical children. Assume this is untrue. They would not broadcast their true location in such a blatant way. Particularly if, as I suspect may be the case, Black is hiding either in their house or nearby, so that he can visit the Potter boy.

Snape shook his head at his memories which flooded his mind from the final days of the war. If the Potter boy appeared anywhere in public, Sirius Black was sure to be there with him. Even his actual mother and father were less constant than his godfather – Black doted on the child sickeningly.

Black is certain to be with them, then, which means they are unlikely to live in a city – too much possibility of someone seeing him. Perhaps somewhere in the country. Somewhere with few and incurious neighbors. And they will certainly have had the sense to place anti-scrying protections on their home.

But they are Gryffindors – in other words, self-assured fools – so perhaps they have even neglected that...

But I cannot imagine that the Ministry has not tried to scry for them before this. The Fudge administration might have bungled so far as not to use basic methods like scrying, but since Vilius became Minister, things have run a bit more smoothly.

It is still worth a try.

But as he had expected, scrying for Sirius Black or the place where he lived brought him no results. Nor did scrying for Freeman or her home. He even tried for Lupin and got nothing.

Hunger was nagging at him by now, and with a mild shock he realized it was nine in the morning. He had arisen at six and eaten nothing, so it probably should not have surprised him as much as it did that he was hungry.

He made a Floo connection with the kitchen and ordered a light breakfast, with a large pot of coffee. When the food came, he ate quickly, thinking while he did.

There is some angle of this I have not yet explored. Some way in which I could reap results from these preliminary tests.

He was just pouring himself a second cup of coffee when it came to him.

The woman. The woman with Lupin. I could scry for her. I do not know her name, but her face is certainly familiar enough to me, after all these visits.

That is, if she is not wearing a glamour as well.

But it cannot hurt to try.

Carefully, he cast the scrying spell again on the bowl of water he'd used for all his previous attempts, thinking hard of the brown-haired woman, her face and voice and manner. And this time, he got something.

The woman stood behind a counter, wearing a nametag. He glanced at it. "Kelly". Unlikely to be her true name, but it will do. Enlarging the picture's frame, he could see that she was ringing up something at a cash register, and shifting his perspective slightly to the right revealed what – books.

A Muggle bookseller. Perhaps her claim to be a Muggle is no lie.

If I could find out where that store is, I would have at least a vague idea of where to begin looking...

But the limited area he could shift the scry over before it would lose focus provided him no clues. It could have been any good-sized bookstore in any middling-to-large town in England.

There is no point in watching any further at this time. I have made a first step by ascertaining that one member of their group is sometimes, and I believe I can assume often, in a place where I can spy on her. I will check again later in the day – perhaps I can catch her going home and follow her, since the scry will remain on her no matter where she goes.

He lifted his coffee mug in a silent toast. To my success, and my enemies' downfall. May it come sooner than I hope.

Due to unforeseen circumstances (the fact, unknown to Snape, that Danger worked only mornings on Wednesdays, and a potion that came to the critical point just at five o'clock on Thursday), it was not until his third day of watching that Snape found his quarry showing signs of packing up to leave. Just as she was closing her handbag, though, a slew of customers appeared from nowhere, and she was the only clerk left on duty, so of course she had to handle them.

Watching her work with mostly calm efficiency, Snape almost missed the opening of the big main doors which were beside the row of cash registers. The man who walked through those doors, however, got his attention – or, rather, the man's walk got his attention first, and the face afterwards.

Lupin. There to pick up his paramour?

So it seemed, for as the woman finished with her last customer, Lupin slid behind the desk that housed the registers, slipped up behind her, and covered her eyes, obviously playing a game which had been so popular among his peers in their seventh year, and which Snape had never understood – the foolish and childish game of "Guess Who?"

The woman startled, then laughed and began to speak. Snape had trained himself to a partial understanding of lip-reading, but the picture in the scry was not of the best quality, so he could pick out only words here and there: "You... awful... John... sneaking up... like that..."

Nothing important. Lovers' talk, nothing more.

The woman lifted the cash drawer from the register and quickly counted the money it contained. Snape admitted, if only to himself, that Muggles had something in their idea of paper money. It might be easier to counterfeit, but it was certainly easier to transport. The coins, she poured into a small machine which sorted and counted them for her. Snape watched it in odd fascination, marveling at the variety of shapes and sizes Muggle coins came in.

She did some quick sums on a piece of paper, compared the total to something she had already written down, and nodded with satisfaction. Placing the money in a zippered bag, she hurried off, probably to deposit it with whoever was in charge of such things. Lupin leaned against the counter, waiting, wearing the same smile Snape had known him to use as he kept watch outside a room where Potter and Black were concocting some nefarious scheme or other.

Did he really think he could get away with changing only superficial things about his appearance and no one would know who he was?

But Severus Snape was a realist, and he had to face reality on this. I knew his face well, if I may so flatter myself, and even I did not recognize him for years. He was always careful never to speak in front of me, since his voice I am certain I would have known. But without that, the small mannerisms of movement and gesture were never anything definite. I always ignored it as a passing resemblance.

In other words, I was just as taken in by his simple ruse as was everyone else.

The woman returned from wherever it was she had gone with a slip of paper in her hand. She gave it to Lupin with a "now-look-what-you've-done" expression. He read the few scribbled words on it and winced, speaking to her. "Honest mistake," Snape caught. "Twice... years... break..."

The woman shook her head at him, smiling ruefully. The two kissed, then strolled out the door together to –

Nothing. Or so it appeared to Snape.

They must have a Muggle vehicle with anti-scrying on it as well. And once she gets into it, I will lose my fix on her...

Quickly, he chose a new item to fix the scry on, while keeping his eyes on that disturbing patch of not-quite-blankness. And so began a nerve-wracking ten minutes, with the car (or so he assumed) traveling along blithely, and Snape working feverishly to keep up, jumping from tree to lamppost to traffic light in his quest to keep it in sight, more or less.

Finally, the thing pulled into another commercial parking lot, this one for what looked like a large grocery store. Snape set his fix on this and watched with relief as the blank patch traveled around it and stopped near a back entrance. Lupin emerged from the blankness (very odd to watch, as he appeared to be created while one looked) and knocked on a door marked "Employees Only".

An older woman opened the door and handed something to Lupin, wagging her finger at him. "Second time... gone... wallet... can't... picking up after you... see you tomorrow morning."

This must be where he works!

Snape quickly added that to his list of facts. He had been too busy trying to keep the car in sight to notice any landmarks along the way, so he still had no idea where they were, other than an urban/suburban area. As Lupin disappeared again, Snape let him go. He was busy looking at all sides of the building, noting its features, its location, and the fact that it had a large parking lot.

She said she would see him tomorrow morning. So will I.

His house may be protected from scrying, but unless he has put it under a Fidelius Charm, which I highly doubt, it is not protected from simple spying.

And spying is one of the things I do best.

His wave of pardonable pride floated him upstairs to have dinner with the rest of the staff, and even to make two or three comments that might, in some way, have been taken as favorable to those they addressed.

It can be excused, considering the great thing I plan to accomplish tomorrow.

“This is the second time you’ve gone home without your wallet,” Sue said, shaking her finger at Remus as she handed it to him. “I can’t always be picking up after you, John. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“See you,” Remus said with a self-depreciating smile. He returned to the truck looking properly sheepish.

Which is quite a feat for a werewolf, eh?

You’re spying on my thoughts again.

When am I not, love? Remus put the truck into gear and stepped on the gas. We’re never apart, you know.

Not completely. Letha pointed something out to me a while back, I don’t know if she ever mentioned it to you...

About our eyes? She did. And she’s right – mine always have just a hint of brown in them now, even if I’ve shut your conscious thoughts completely out of mine –

And mine always a touch of blue. I suppose it simply means that we’re connected.

Which we always are.

And I wouldn’t have it any other way.

Nor would I. Remus reached over to stroke his wife’s flyaway hair and got her shoulder by mistake, making them both smile.

And now I will shut up and let you deal with the traffic.

Thank you ever so.

After dinner, Aletha sat at the piano, her hands exploring melodic ideas, painting her day in music, Remus called it. They wandered into a familiar sequence of chords, something she had recently learned, the accompaniment for a duet piece, a love song for a man and a woman...

Sirius came in from the kitchen, drying his hands on a dish towel. Aletha smiled at him and modulated the chords back to the beginning of the song. Shall we, my love?

We shall, his answering smile said, and he came in on his cue beautifully, speaking – singing – words of comfort to his love.

Sirius had a wonderful baritone, rich and lovely, but he pigheadedly refused to learn to read music. Aletha had had to teach him the entire song by ear. But she was glad she had. Her hands ascended the keys as she took a deep breath for her high entrance.

Draco skidded through the archway and quietly sat down. A few lines later, Meghan and Neenie tiptoed in through the doorway and joined Draco on the couch.

Over Aletha's last note, Sirius reentered the song, offering to shelter and protect her. He had only half the theme this time, with Aletha taking the other half.

Remus was just visible in the hallway, leaning against the wall, listening.

Sirius' voice soared to his version of the high note Aletha had previously hit.

Danger came up behind Remus, resting her head on his shoulder, and Harry peered around her legs before scampering (quietly) into the room and joining the rest of the cubs on the couch.

Now it was Aletha's turn to come in over Sirius' last note, with a repetition of the high theme. She sang her plea to him, to never let them be parted, and then they sang in unison, voices joining as hearts so obviously already had.

Aletha's voice turned pleading, begging him to profess his love, and Sirius didn't even wait for her to finish. They sang their mutual love in harmony, their two notes perfectly matched.

Aletha put all the emotion she had been giving to her singing into the long piano interlude which preceded the end of the song. It helped, of course, that Sirius had his hand on her shoulder. Finally she reached the climactic chords, and they sang again, this time in octaves, Aletha's soprano soaring gloriously. Then back into harmony for the final phrase, sung tenderly and slowly to one another's eyes.

Aletha let the final chord die away.

The rest of the Pack broke into applause.

"Beautiful," Danger said. "Absolutely beautiful."

"Stick around, we're here all night," Sirius said. "Any requests?"

"Yes, let us do one," Remus said, coming into the room. "If you'd be so kind as to play, Letha."

Aletha flipped to her music book's table of contents. "What did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking..." Remus ran his finger down the page. "This one. If you want to, of course, Danger."

"Oh, why not, if you want to make me look bad in front of everyone, I guess I will," Danger said in a mock-grumpy voice. "You two are a hard act to follow," she added over her shoulder as she took her singing stance.

"We try, we try," Sirius said. "Want me to turn pages, Letha?"

“If you like.”

Aletha began the slow, rhythmic accompaniment, making Neenie gasp with delight. It was one of her favorite songs, since she had developed a keen appreciation for romantic stories over the last year. Aletha sometimes suspected her of secretly wishing for a male friend who wasn't her brother, so she could practice feminine wiles on him.

Remus turned to Danger and began, in his soft, warm tenor, speaking of a place that deadened feeling, a life that seemed only make-believe, and his love for her, which changed all that...

Danger smiled at him and replied in a slightly husky alto, calling him the one lasting thing in her changing life.

Remus looked into the distance, singing that both their lives must change.

Danger moved to him and put a hand on his shoulder, reminding him that they still had tonight.

Remus looked back at her and stroked her face, telling her about the music made by their love...

Neenie sighed in contentment as the chorus began. Remus sang alone first, then Danger took the melody, and then they sang together, hoping to dance like it was their last night alive...

And dance they did, while Aletha played, Sirius turned her pages, and the cubs watched it all enraptured.

We are eventually going to have to at least get them separate beds, you know, Remus pointed out after the cubs had been tucked in.

You can tell them that. We'll take you to the hospital afterwards.

Oh, come on. They won't take it that badly. Will they?

You never know until you try, and my motto is “Be Prepared”.

I didn't know you were a Boy Scout. Remus looked Danger up and down. You seem to be lacking a certain basic requirement...

Danger bared her teeth. If I didn't love you so much, I would push you down the stairs here and now.

Tsk tsk, threats of violence toward your alpha male. I'd better teach you your place, female...

There was a squeal from the direction of the front room.

"What's that?" Aletha asked, looking up.

"Probably just Danger getting herself kissed again," Sirius said, leafing through his fan mail and pulling out one particular letter. "One of these days, I swear I'm going to hand McGonagall all the letters she's ever written 'Valentina Jett', and just watch her have a stroke right there in front of me."

"You horrible man," Aletha said, insinuating herself onto her husband's lap. "I ought to slap you."

And then it wasn't just Danger getting herself kissed. Snape awakened early the next morning. Perhaps too early.

But one can never be too early for one's destiny. And it must be my destiny to find these treacherous fools, both the kidnappers and those who hide them. They are equally guilty and should be punished alike.

And they will be.

He spent about an hour going over his plan a few last times, just to make sure he knew exactly what he was doing. When he was satisfied, he went up to the kitchen to get a simple breakfast and a packed lunch, since he was planning to be away all day.

Then he left the castle, carrying with him a bag, containing his food, two or three books he was currently reading, and two flasks of what appeared to be a simple Four-Hour Invisibility Potion, but tweaked as only Snape could, to mask not only his visual appearance, but his

scent as well. He had not forgotten the humiliating experience in his fourth year which had taught him that even in human form, a werewolf had a better sense of smell than a human.

Of course, he had not known, then, exactly why Lupin had been able to find his usual hiding place near the Gryffindor dormitory. He had only known that the other boy had found him, although he had taken pains to conceal himself from sight. His discovery of Lupin's nature in his seventh year had shed new light on many such happenings.

But soon I will have my revenge for all. And in such a way that none can fault me – that all will thank me, in fact. I will be a public benefactor, a hero even.

He passed the gates of Hogwarts and stopped. From here, he could Apparate to the parking lot of Lupin's workplace. Then, and only then, he would drink the potion and disappear. Drinking a potion too soon before Apparating could have bad effects, such as sickening the Apparater or causing the potion not to take effect properly, and he did not wish to become invisible and then have to wait half an hour of his precious four before arriving at his destination.

If any Muggles happened to be about, they would indeed see magic – a man appearing out of thin air, and disappearing again a moment later – but Muggles tended to see what they wanted to see. They would either come up with some twisted and tortured logical way that it could have happened, or they would simply forget and/or deny that they had ever seen it in the first place.

Snape smiled, visualized the parking lot he had seen in the scry, and vanished with a soft pop.

Sue was just getting out of her car when she heard the sound from behind her. It was faint but familiar. It was the sound Dorothy made when she came to visit by herself, when she didn't bring little Terry with her – that popping-out-of-the-air thing, Apparating they called it...

Casually, she looked in her drivers' side mirror to see what – or, more likely, who – had made the sound.

It was a man, dressed in long robes like she usually saw Dorothy wearing these days unless they were going out together. He had long black hair which looked as if it needed a wash, pale skin, and a large, hooked nose. Altogether, a most unpleasant looking fellow. He was surveying the parking lot with a satisfied smirk.

As she watched, he took a small bottle of something from a bag at his side, opened it, drank the contents –

And vanished completely.

Well, that's rather out of the ordinary. I wonder why he's here?

A blue truck pulled into the employee lot, and Sue had her answer.

Quite possibly something to do with John. He either is a wizard or he knows one, I'm sure of that much, and I'm also sure that he and I are the only two here with that distinction. So, since from what Dorothy says wizards don't truckle much with us ordinary folk unless we have some connection with them, this fellow is either after him or me.

Maybe John can tell me who he is. He was rather distinctive-looking, and I know I've never met him...

"Dark greasy hair, pale skin, and a big nose?" John repeated, sounding a bit startled. "I think I do know him – but I didn't think he had any idea where to find me. This could be trouble." He smiled wryly. "Although not completely unforeseen."

He closed his eyes for a moment, as if praying, though Sue was sure he wasn't a religious man. Then he opened them and sighed. "Well, there's probably very little I can do about it. And I think that batch of doughnuts is done."

They worked together, quietly, until John's shift ended at 12:30. He took off his apron, hung it carefully on his peg, and made a show of checking to see that he had his wallet with him. Sue smiled.

"Take care of yourself," he said, giving her a quick hug. "Goodbye."

“Goodbye,” Sue echoed, feeling a little thrown off by something. As the door closed behind him, she figured it out.

John always says “See you” or “Have a good day”. This may be the first time I’ve ever heard him say “Goodbye”.

I wonder if it means anything.

The timer on the number five oven went off, recalling Sue to the present and the batch of muffins which was in danger of burning up.

I’m a sentimental fool. It doesn’t mean anything. It can’t. He’ll come in Monday afternoon and crack some quiet little joke that takes everyone a minute to get.

Just like always.

Even if Snape had not seen Lupin drive into the parking lot in the vehicle he was currently riding in, he would have had no trouble identifying it.

Only Remus Lupin would have put a bumper sticker on his truck reading “Werewolves Kick Ass”.

To minimize the strain put on his potion – the adaptations for smell, after all, had not been fully tested – Snape was riding in the bed of the truck.

And why, if what I have heard is true, Muggle children would deem it a treat to be allowed to ride back here is beyond me. I will be black-and-blue by the time we get to wherever we’re going.

Finally, finally, the horrific ride was over. Lupin pulled into a driveway, and Snape used the last of the engine noise to cover the sound of his climbing out. No sooner had the truck gone silent than the right-hand door of the duplex flew open, and four children shot out and mobbed Lupin, shouting incoherently.

Snape looked at them, sorting out their faces. That is Potter. That one the Malfoy child. That is Freeman’s daughter, and Black’s too if my

supposition is correct. And that one I do not know, but she resembles Lupin's woman.

Said woman was now in a highly compromising position with Lupin, ignoring the noises of disgust emanating from the children. Snape found himself inclined to agree with them. Must you do that in public?

Freeman emerged from the house, her horrendous dog bouncing along beside her. "All aboard for the amusement park," she called out cheerily, and the boys and the younger girl scrambled into the back seat of the truck's cab, while the dog made a somewhat ponderous jump into the bed of the truck. It wrinkled its nose and sneezed, but then settled down comfortably enough.

"Are you sure you don't want to come?" the woman was asking Lupin.

"No, I could use some quiet time. Just me and Neenie. How about it, Kitten?"

The little girl nodded. "It sounds acceptable," she said, making the adults laugh. The woman took the keys of the truck from Lupin and got into the driver's seat. Freeman had already settled herself on the passenger side.

Perfect. I can get in, overpower Lupin, and take him and the girl to the Ministry. With the combination of my testimony and his – willing or not – there will be Aurors here by the time the rest return.

Snape made for the door, being sure to walk softly. He could not afford a mistake now...

Remus opened the back door, allowing a breeze into the den room, and collapsed into one of the chairs. Ahhh.

Don't talk to me for about ten minutes, Danger said.

What's up?

Traffic. Worst I've seen in a while.

You usually don't drive, either. Maybe I should have come after all...

No, I'll manage. I just don't need any distractions.

All right, I'll keep my thoughts quiet. Much love.

Much love.

Remus consciously dimmed their link, shielding his thoughts within his own mind. Maybe I should take the opportunity and think about what to get her for her birthday. And how to prank it, to pay her back for mine. I know it's a ways away, but a little forethought never hurt...

His thoughts, inevitably, drifted into more unpleasant channels. Snape. We knew he was coming, but not when. If he's tracked me to work, then it probably won't be long before he finds out where we –

A scream of terror shattered the silence of the Den.

Remus was on his feet. Front room. Letha's side. Oh God, let it be just a spider, or a mouse, or something like that...

But Neenie wouldn't scream that way for something so little as that...

He was in the doorway of the front room, wand in hand.

"Drop it," said Severus Snape's voice, "or you never see the girl again."

(A/N: This lovely cliffy is dedicated to everyone who wanted more action, more suspense, and more excitement.

Note to everyone: The stay in America will not be long, two chapters, three at the outside. I couldn't resist a chance to have them make fun of certain facets of American life... plus, I wanted them to make a clean break with their "old" lives before starting on the "new" part, and taking a trip seemed like the best way to do that.

Next chapter, no surprise – “Confrontations”. Moony vs. Snape... place your bets now, ladies and gentlemen. See yinz then! Send me lots of review love!)

Chapter 30: Confrontations

Remus' thoughts came in short bursts as he stared at the scene before him.

Snape. Here. Now.

And he has Neenie.

The girl's hazel eyes were filled with pure terror. Snape had his left arm across her chest, holding her firmly against himself. His right hand, of course, held his wand, pointed straight at Remus.

"I said, drop it," Snape repeated. "And I mean now."

"Or what?" Remus asked, astounded at the calm in his voice.

"Or I Disapparate with her. Straight to the Ministry. She could tell some interesting stories to the Aurors, I'm sure."

Slowly, Remus bent down and placed his wand on the floor. "Jane," he said, looking Hermione in the eye. "You're going to be all right."

Neenie blinked hard, twice. "Yes, Daddy," she said in a trembling voice.

"Daddy," Snape repeated, sounding half-disgusted, half-amused. "You do seem fond of stealing children – first the Potter boy, then the Malfoys' son. Where did you steal this one?"

"She was a gift," Remus replied calmly, masking both his astonishment that Snape knew about Harry and Draco and his elation that Hermione wasn't panicking, was still thinking enough to give him the proper signal for yes and respond to her out-of-den name correctly. We might have a chance. But it all depends on her.

"A gift. How nice. A gift from whom?"

"My wife."

“Your wife? You tricked some poor woman into marrying you?”

“No, she tricked me into marrying her. It’s not quite the same.”

Hermione’s right hand crept up to her mouth. “What are you doing, girl?” Snape demanded.

“She sucks her thumb,” Remus said.

“And you encourage her, I’m sure. No doubt because you find it cute.” Snape sneered. “I wonder what else you’ve taught her. Besides disrespect for the law.”

“Disrespect, Severus? On the contrary. We hold the law in the highest regard in this house. What law are you obeying by breaking into our home and holding my daughter hostage?”

“I am committing a small crime to prevent a larger one,” Snape said loftily. “Looking for a notorious criminal. Where is he, anyway?”

“Who?”

“Don’t play stupid with me, Lupin, you know I mean Black. Where are you hiding him?”

“I have no idea where Sirius Black is, Severus.” Absolute truth. Depending on traffic, they could be just about anywhere right now. Remus rubbed his left hand, feeling the heat of his wedding band under his fingers. It shouldn’t be that warm, should it?

“You always were a terrible liar,” Snape said with derision.

“And that, no doubt, is why, through my years at Hogwarts, only one person whom I did not wish to know found out about my, ah, condition.”

Snape's face twisted. "I would have realized sooner or later," he hissed. "If Black hadn't tried to kill me by telling me how to follow you."

"I admit that was a foolish thing to do," Remus said, suppressing a highly unethical wish that James Potter hadn't intervened on that night all those years ago. "But he was seventeen years old. Many people do stupid things when they're seventeen. It wasn't very intelligent of you to follow the advice of your known enemy."

"Don't taunt me," Snape said venomously. "One more word from you, and your little Jane goes to the Ministry, and from there to an orphanage, when the Aurors come for you."

Remus inclined his head. "As you like." He allowed his eyes to drift down to Hermione.

Cautiously, the little girl extended the first two fingers of her right hand and rotated her hand in a half-circle horizontally, as if saluting, as much as she could with her thumb still in her mouth. Her eyes never left Remus'.

YES! Good girl! It was the hand-sign for "Tell me what to do".

"Where is your Floo fireplace?" Snape demanded. "Assuming you have one."

"We do. But I won't show it to you."

"You are in no position to be saying what you will and won't do, werewolf."

"You never could grasp that calling me what I am doesn't offend me," Remus said mildly. "This, on the other hand –"

He held up his left hand, one finger upraised.

The ring finger.

Snape stared at it for a moment, then began to laugh. "You can't even insult me correctly!"

Neenie blinked twice and pulled her thumb from her mouth.

"Oh, I think I can," Remus said quietly. "I think I just did, in fact."

Hermione drove her elbow backwards, hard.

Snape's laughter was cut off abruptly.

The ring finger of the left hand upraised is the Marauder hand-signal for "Hurt him. BAD."

Snape doubled over, wheezing. Neenie stamped on his foot and twisted free of his hold, and Remus dove for his wand and shouted "Expelliarmus!"

Snape fell to the floor as his wand flew from his hand and into Remus'. He handed it to Neenie and whispered, "Hide." She nodded and dashed down the hall.

Snape snarled, his face still twisted in pain, and started to get up. Remus shot a Stunner at him, but Snape rolled out of the way, snatched a book from the floor, and threw it at his head. Remus ducked it, and Snape moved faster than anyone who'd just been hit where he'd been hit had a right to move, not toward the hall, which Remus was guarding, but through the wall of the front room –

The archway!

Remus took off down the hall, knowing where Snape was headed –

The back yard. Where Neenie went with his wand. I hope she had enough sense to go where he can't follow her...

Snape shoved the pain to the back of his mind. He couldn't let it distract him now. He knew he would pay when he returned to his normal state, but that, like everything else, was pushed aside in the necessity of getting his wand back and beating Lupin.

He crashed out the door into the small green area at the back of the house.

Where did she...

A gasp drew his attention upwards.

The girl was clinging to one of the limbs of the large tree, probably about fifteen feet up or so. She had his wand clutched in one grubby hand.

“Give that back, you horrible little brat,” Snape wheezed, glaring at her.

She stuck out her tongue at him. “Come’n’get it, Professor Grumpy.”

The other back door burst open and Lupin catapulted into the yard.

Time seemed to slow. Snape found himself thinking in a leisurely manner, I can accomplish nothing now. I must depart before he harms me.

Lupin was starting to say something, but Snape had no fear. I can be gone from here before he completes his spell.

He imagined the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic and commanded his magic to show him where it lay. The backyard dimmed to his sight, and a faint glow arose where the Atrium was. Off to his right, but that didn’t matter. It could have been behind him and it wouldn’t have mattered.

Lupin had spoken the first two syllables of whatever he was saying.

Connect the two points with a straight line. A radiant line appeared, connecting his feet to the glow of the Ministry.

The third syllable left the werewolf’s lips.

And now, follow that straight line. Snape imagined the world blurring backwards past him as he stood still, until he was where he wanted to be...

Lupin completed his spell.

As the backyard faded completely, Snape felt something brush past his face.

How odd.

He staggered slightly as he arrived in the Atrium, and wondered vaguely what on earth he was doing at the Ministry of Magic. He had no business that would take him there.

I should get back to Hogwarts.

He took one step and realized that he had a terrible headache. His right foot also hurt, as well as another portion of his anatomy.

What has happened to me? I am not usually absent-minded, or given to activities that harm me...

He reached into his wand pocket, intending to cast a self-diagnostic spell.

His wand was missing.

This is extremely troubling.

Carefully, he checked in the bag he was carrying, in all his other pockets, even up his sleeves in case he had, for some unknown reason, put it there. His wand was nowhere to be found.

He shook his head, and then wished he hadn't.

I need a dark room, a strong headache potion, and a bag of ice.

Moving gingerly, he maneuvered over to one of the fireplaces.

"Severus Snape's office, Hogwarts," he said, casting Floo powder into the flames.

It wasn't until he fell onto his stone floor, retching painfully, that he remembered that many headaches also induce nausea.

The Memory Charm left a small crater in Hermione's tree. Remus swore under his breath. It didn't hit him. I wasn't fast enough, he got away...!

Then he looked again.

That was a strong spell. Too strong to have left that small a mark.

Could it have taken partial effect? Hit him just as he Disapparated?

In which case...

"Moony?" said a quivering voice.

Remus blinked out of his trance and hurried forward to lift a shaking Hermione down from the tree. "Kitten, you were wonderful," he said to her, holding her close. "You were my brave girl-cub. My warrior princess. Everyone is going to be so proud of you. I'm proud of you. You did exactly what needed to be done."

"I was scared," Neenie whispered, shivering in his arms. "I was so scared."

"And you fought anyway. That's what being brave is all about. Fighting through the fear. Hermione, you were brilliant."

The girl looked shocked. "We're out of den," she said in a hushed voice.

Remus sighed. "That's not going to matter in a few hours, sweetheart, but you're right. Come on, let's get inside."

WHAT is going on there? My wedding ring feels like it just came out of a furnace and this is the first instant I could take my mind off my driving long enough to talk!

Right on cue. Are you anywhere that you can park?

I can be. Why?

Everyone needs to be home. As in now.

Danger cursed, picking the reason why out of Remus' memories of the last few minutes. We'll be there in two minutes. Have to find somewhere sheltered to Apparate from.

Fine. Neenie and I are both all right. See you in a few minutes. Danger had overestimated. In exactly one minute, nine seconds, she exploded out of the air in the den room, followed by Aletha with Draco clutching her leg and Sirius with Harry attached to his side and Meghan in his arms.

"Snape," Aletha said almost before she'd fully Apparated.

"Yes."

Sirius swore explosively, making Draco look at him appreciatively.

"Out," Aletha said firmly, making shooing motions toward the door. "All of you, upstairs. Go."

"Wait," Remus said. "Everyone needs to know that if it hadn't been for Hermione, this would have been a lot worse. She deserves some recognition."

Everyone clapped. The boys and Meghan looked as if they couldn't wait to get Neenie upstairs and ask her what had happened.

"Now out," said Aletha, and the cubs scurried out of the room down the hallway.

"So explain," Danger said, sitting down on the sofa. "Snape got in. He saw you. He made it pretty damn clear he knows, or suspects, Sirius is here. And he got away – but you're not worried. Or you're only half-worried. I'm missing something here."

“I tried to Oblivate him just as he was Disapparating. I know the spell didn’t hit him fully – there’s an impact crater on the tree out there – but I’m also sure that it didn’t miss him entirely either.”

“So he’s been partially Obliviated?” Aletha asked. “What effect will that have?”

“One of three,” Remus said. “One, he could forget part of what he saw here. But even one clear memory of me would be enough to get this place thoroughly investigated, and we are not up to that. Luckily, that’s the least likely thing to have happened.”

Sirius nodded. “Definitely luckily.”

“Two, he could half-forget about the whole thing. He’d have vague memories of seeing me and calling me names and threatening Hermione, but it would seem like a dream to him. That would be the best for us, but it’s still quite unlikely.”

“Too bad,” Danger said with a sigh.

“Three, and most likely, he could forget about us entirely for now, and regain his memories over time.”

“How much time?” Sirius asked, voicing the question on everyone’s minds.

“Anywhere from hours to days. Three hours, minimum, would be my guess.”

“So...” Aletha looked out the back door for a moment. “We have three hours to pack and get out. We cannot afford to be here when they come. And they will come. Now that Snape knows we’re here, he won’t hesitate an instant.”

Sirius bit his lip, looking torn. “Letha,” he said quietly. “They’re not after you. You haven’t done anything – well, nothing they can get you for. All they’ll have is Snape’s word, and that’s not enough to make

you testify under verification. You don't have to leave. You can stay here, with Meghan, give her security, a stable home – ”

“You are dense, Sirius Black,” Aletha said in annoyance. “Meghan will get all the security and stability she needs from staying with her Pack. So will I. You think it matters to me where we go, as long as we're together?” She got a look at his face. “You do! You actually thought – hold still!” She launched herself onto his lap and blocked his face from view for the better part of a minute.

“For better or for worse,” she said, tapping her wedding ring, when they were able to speak again. “I said it, I meant it. You don't get rid of me that easily!”

“If that's settled,” Danger said delicately, “maybe we can discuss where we ought to go.”

“I thought we knew that already,” Sirius said, his matter-of-fact tone somewhat at odds with the slightly incredulous smile on his face. “America, to visit Letha's aunt.”

“And that's another thing,” Aletha said, poking Sirius in the shoulder. “How exactly were you planning to visit my aunt without me?”

“Letha, enough,” Remus said, briefly invoking Pack-authority. “That's our ultimate destination, but we can't just buy tickets and fly out tonight. We need somewhere to go for one night, maybe two, to make preparations, somewhere they'll never think to look...” The Pack was ready to go within two hours, mostly due to the fact that the cubs were fully cognizant of what was going on, and had gone upstairs, not to play, but to pack their things.

“We should have known they'd listen in on us,” Aletha said in amusement. “They are Marauders, after all.”

“But they're also cubs,” Danger said. “Look. No toothbrushes.”

“Wishful thinking.” Aletha rolled her eyes and Summoned them from the bathroom.

Remus took a moment to write a note to Dumbledore and put it in a box into which he also put Snape's wand. He Flooed to the Hogwarts kitchens and gave the box to Dobby, with instructions to give it to Dumbledore at six o'clock.

When it was time to leave, everyone spent a few minutes just walking around, looking at all the familiar things, saying silent goodbyes. Harry took his last slides on his favorite banisters. Neenie climbed to her favorite place in her tree and hugged the trunk hard. Meghan watered the garden, hoping it would survive the summer. Draco played his favorite song on the piano, which had to be left behind. It began with a simple child's piano piece, then became a song of innocent love, not unrequited but simply unknown.

Aletha blinked back a nostalgic tear as she remembered teaching him that song. Like my father taught it to me when I was little.

"I know how you feel." Sirius had come up behind her at the window to the back yard. "It's been a good Den to us. It's a shame to leave."

Aletha shook her head. "Maybe, but the Den is where the Pack is. We have to remember that." She turned around. "You have to remember it. I will not run out on you when things get tough. I'm here for good."

"I just thought you should have the option..."

"Think again. I'm part of this Pack, same as you, and where we go, we go together. End of story." She hugged Sirius fiercely. "You, Remus, Danger, and the cubs are the only home I need. And you with your talk about stability – how stable would it have been for Meghan if everyone she loves left her?"

"All right, all right, you won already, you don't have to convince me any more," Sirius protested, laughing a little. "Are you ready?"

"Probably as ready as I'll ever be," Aletha sighed.

"Let's go, then."

Danger sneezed as soon as she stepped out of the Floo. And sneezed again. Sirius had told them the Floo hookup was in the basement, so she had expected the darkness. What she hadn't expected, but probably should have, was the dust. Harry, next to her, sneezed too.

She pulled out her wand. "Lumos." The wand-light showed a large table, surrounded by benches and chairs, and a large sideboard in the corner, with a few other odds and ends scattered throughout the room. A thick layer of dust lay on everything, and the whole place felt as if no one had lived there for at least a year.

Because no one has.

Green flames flared behind her, startling Harry and prompting them both to step forward, out of Remus and Draco's way. "Creepy," Draco commented after he finished sneezing. Somewhere in the house, a being awoke.

"Invaders," he muttered to himself. "Invaders in the house." Remus Disapparated with no more than a nod to Danger. This was part of their plan – he and Sirius would be handling the trunks after Aletha came through with the girls – and Aletha's form was already growing in the fire. Danger knelt down and snagged a girl on each arm as they fell out of the fireplace. "You two just don't have that good of balance," she said ruefully.

"It comes with practice," Aletha said as she stepped neatly out. "And with a little more weight. The fire throws poor Meg around like she's nothing."

"I am not nothing," Meghan said with dignity.

"I didn't say you were, Pearl," Aletha said, stroking her daughter's head. The being made his way down the first set of stairs.

Invaders must be removed. They will disturb the Mistress.

“So this was Padfoot’s house?” Harry asked, running his hand along one of the chair backs. “It’s dirty.”

“It probably wasn’t this dirty when he lived here,” Aletha said. “But it was probably just this gloomy.”

“Why am I very glad we don’t have to stay here?” Danger asked rhetorically, turning to the fire in time to catch the end of one of the trunks. Sirius pushed the other end out and Disapparated without bothering to get out of the fire.

“Show-off,” Aletha said with a smile.

Draco was looking at the door. “I hear something,” he said quietly.

“What do you hear, little fox?” Danger asked affectionately.

Draco scowled. “It’s not a game. There’s somebody there.” He pointed at the door. “He’s coming.”

The being stopped. The child heard. Clever child, to hear so much. The child... His eyes narrowed, and he sniffed the air. The child is a Master! And one of the others too, one of the girls, she is a Mistress, in the direct line!

Then he scowled as he remembered what that meant. Only one is left in the direct line. This one must be his child. A nasty blood-traitor, to further the line, he should never have done it...

Aletha stepped cautiously toward the door, wand at the ready. “Hello?” she called. “We won’t hurt you. You can come out.” Draco stepped partly behind her, watching the door, which suddenly opened.

Into the kitchen sidled a house-elf. It was wearing a filthy rag of some sort as a loincloth and looking very hard at Aletha. “Kreacher is hearing voices,” he said in his squeaking voice. “Kreacher is coming to see who is in his Mistress’ house.”

Sirius stepped from the fire behind the second trunk and shook his hair back. “Your Master is in your Mistress’ house,” he said in a very controlled voice. “Listen carefully, Kreacher. You are to leave us

alone unless we specifically call you. Do not come if the children call. And you are not to tell anyone we are here. Do you understand?"

"Kreacher understands," the house-elf said, edging along the wall, Aletha keeping him in her wand-light beam. "Kreacher wonders who these children are, that two of them are Kreacher's new little Master and Mistress, and where Master has been, that he has been away so long..."

"That's none of your business," said Sirius harshly. "Go on, then, get a move on. Back to wherever it is you hole up."

Kreacher moved back toward the stairs. "Should Kreacher tell Mistress, then, that Master has come back?" he asked.

"What are you talking about?" Sirius asked sharply. "My mother's dead."

"Yes, of course, but Master has forgotten his mother's portrait, which hangs in the hallway."

"Oh, hel... p," Sirius finished when Harry and Draco turned to him expectantly. "I did forget. And it probably screams just like she used to."

Aletha watched as an idea dawned in Sirius' face. "What are you thinking?" she asked mischievously as she saw the Marauder rise again from beneath the arrogant pure-blood face he had briefly worn.

"I'm thinking... what would bother my mother more than you?" Sirius held out his hands to Aletha, who laughed and came to him in a run. "Beautiful, talented, the mother of my child – and Muggleborn. She'll have a fit."

"And even though you couldn't do it to her while she was alive..."

"I can still do it to her now," Sirius finished, grinning. "Care to come?" he asked Remus and Danger, who had finished getting the trunks out of the fire.

“Depends,” Remus said. “Can the cubs hear this?”

“Only if they don’t mind being half-deaf.”

“I mean language-wise.”

Sirius sighed. “They won’t hear anything from her they won’t hear from pure-bloods everywhere. Not too much actual swearing, I don’t think.”

“In that case, certainly,” Remus said, offering his arm to Danger, who took it.

“Come on, cubs,” Sirius said, taking Draco by the hand. “We’re going to meet your mean grandmother.”

Kreacher scuttled up the stairs before them, muttering to himself.

“How dare you come back,” the portrait snapped as soon as it realized who was in front of it. “After betraying the best hope of wizardkind, the only one who truly realized the crisis our people are in, how dare you reenter this house?”

“Because it’s my house now,” Sirius said. “Don’t worry, we’re not staying. We’ll only be here a day or two. Then it’ll just be you and the mad elf again.”

“He’s better company by far than you ever were. The shame of my flesh, that’s all you are.”

“Now, is that any way to talk to your only son?” Sirius said in a coaxing tone. “And after I brought my family to meet you. My wife, my son, my daughter...”

“Wife? Son? Daughter?” Mrs. Black was wide awake now. “You, you who were disowned, you dared to have children, you dared to pass on our family name?”

“Well, one child,” Sirius said. “We adopted the other one. But he’s a Black, all right. You remember Narcissa, don’t you?”

“Of course I remember Narcissa, don’t be a fool,” Mrs. Black said curtly. “And I remember how she died. Stupid woman.”

“Don’t call my mother names,” Draco said angrily. Mrs. Black’s painted eyes oriented on him.

“So you’re Narcissa’s boy, are you?” she said with a bit less rancor. “Well, you have your father’s looks, no getting around it. But your blood is pure, and it’s Black. That’s what matters.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Draco was obviously trying not to laugh.

“Now, where’s this wife of yours?” Mrs. Black asked, looking at her son with perhaps a touch of favor.

“Here she is,” Sirius said, gesturing to Aletha, who stepped forward and waved. “And here’s our little one. Meghan Lily.”

“Why, she’s actually pretty,” said Mrs. Black, peering at Meghan, who hid her face in Sirius’ robes. “Come on, girl, show some spirit, you’re a Black, after all. And what’s your name?” she asked Aletha abruptly.

“Aletha Freeman, ma’am. Well, Freeman-Black now, of course.”

“Freeman,” Mrs. Black mused. “I don’t recall any Freeman family in Britain.”

“My father was American, ma’am.”

“Oh, thank heaven. For a moment, I thought you were going to say he was a half-blood.”

“No, ma’am. He was a Muggle.”

A shocked silence fell. The cubs looked at each other and plugged their ears.

“My mother too,” Aletha added helpfully.

“You...” Mrs. Black was having trouble finding words. “You... YOU ABOMINATION, YOU BLOOD TRAITOR! YOU MARRIED, YOU SLEPT WITH, YOU FATHERED CHILDREN ON A MUGGLEBORN!”

“Guilty as charged,” Sirius said with a grin. “And I think that’s about enough of that, so I’m going to say something I always wanted to say. Shut up, you horrible old hag.”

He and Remus pulled the velvet curtains shut over the portrait, cutting off another incipient howl.

“That was fun,” Aletha said with a chuckle.

Severus Snape was lying in his bed, curtains drawn, with one cold cloth on his forehead and another one on a different part of him, when he heard someone come in.

Who could that be? Only the other Heads of House and the Headmaster knew his password, and they usually firecalled ahead to see if he was able to receive company...

Which I am not. He was about to say something to that effect when the bedcurtains were swept aside.

“Hello, Severus,” said Albus Dumbledore very politely. “I wish to speak with you.”

Snape squinted painfully at the light which flooded in. “Headmaster, I really am not well...”

Dumbledore flicked his wand. Most of Snape’s headache vanished, along with a great deal of the pain in other places. “Better?”

“Yes. Thank you.” Snape got up and moved over to the softer of the chairs he kept in his room. Politeness dictates I offer the better seat to the guest, but prudence dictates that I keep it for myself today.

“You seem to have been injured,” Dumbledore noted, watching him move. “And to have lost your wand. And yet you have no idea of how these events occurred...”

Snape put his hand to his forehead. “No. No idea.” But he did have an idea, he realized as soon as he had spoken. A rather hazy idea, involving several impossible things and a very painful experience, but an idea nonetheless...

“Allow me to clarify,” Dumbledore said. He pointed his wand at Severus and spoke an incantation.

It was as if someone had lit a torch inside his brain. The events of the day flooded back. Spying on Lupin, taking the girl hostage, his hideously painful defeat...

Dumbledore watched, his face impassive, as Snape assimilated the fact that he had been successfully Obliviated, and had returned merrily to Hogwarts, while Lupin and the girl remained at large, to sound the alarm to their band of outlaws...

“Let me tell you,” Dumbledore said very calmly, “exactly what you have done, Severus, and what those actions mean.”

Snape winced. That was not a promising beginning.

I have a feeling I will indeed remember this day for a long time.

Merely not in the way I had hoped.

(A/N: OK, everyone, has Severus suffered enough? And would you like to hear what Dumbledore said to him, maybe in a one-shot? And would you like to see the cubs' packing scene, also in a one-shot? (And in order, the answers: No, yes, and yes.)

Hope everyone liked the resolution of that plot thread. Next chapter – America, baseball, the beach, and a special cameo appearance by marathonerobsessed! Stay tuned!)

Chapter 31: It's a Nice Place to Visit

On July 6, 1987, two men, two women, and four children passed through customs and security at Heathrow Airport in London. Their papers were all in order for a visit to the United States, and it didn't seem to bother anyone that all eight of them had the same last name. After all, there were plenty of Blacks around.

No one noticed, either, that there seemed to be a lot of duplication on the dates of birth on the passports – the two men had the same stated date of birth, as did the larger three of the children. If anyone had noticed, they would have been quickly reassured that the gentlemen were fraternal twins and the children fraternal triplets, and this explanation probably would have satisfied them.

And so Patrick Black, his wife Carrie, and their daughter Meghan, and John Black, his wife Gertrude, and their children Harry, Drake, and Hermione boarded a plane for America with as little fuss as anyone traveling internationally with children.

Which is to say, a great deal.

"Quit poking me," Hermione said irritably.

"I'm not poking you," Harry said.

"Yes you are."

"No I'm not."

"Yes you are."

"No I'm not."

"Yes you – "

"Stop it," Aletha said wearily from beside Harry.

"But he's poking me!"

“I am not!”

“I don’t care who’s poking who, or who isn’t. Both of you be quiet, right now.”

“Or what?” Harry said.

He must be tired. He’s sassing back. Aletha lowered her voice. “Or I will take you to the restroom and put you to sleep, and keep you asleep until tomorrow morning. You’ll miss the airplane landing, and customs, and baggage claim, and everything else fun that we get to do. And that goes for all of you.”

“But I didn’t do anything,” Draco protested from beyond Hermione.

“I know you too well, little fox. It’s only a matter of time. Now, I do have some short-term Sleeping Potions with me. Four hours, which means you’d wake up in time for landing. Who wants to take a nap?”

“What do they taste like?” Hermione asked.

“Let me check.” Aletha pulled out a vial. “This batch looks like orange. Who wants one?”

Draco and Hermione raised their hands, and Harry followed suit after a brief moment. Meghan, in the seat on Aletha’s other side, was already asleep and had been for the two hours they’d been on the plane – she was still small enough to carry easily and not big enough to make her own decision, so she’d been dosed before they started. The older three, though, had insisted they could handle the eight-hour flight, had assured their Pack-parents they would behave.

We should have known better.

Or maybe we just shouldn’t have put them all on the same row...

Oh well. We did what we did. And no harm done, either way.

Aletha handed the potions down the row. The cubs drank them off quickly and handed the empty vials back. By the time Aletha had put them away in her bag, Hermione and Draco were already asleep. Harry yawned. "Sorry I was bad," he murmured to her, squirming into a more comfortable position.

"It's all right, Greeneyes," Aletha told him. She stroked her cheek with two fingers, from just in front of her ear down to the corner of her mouth, then touched Harry's cheek lightly, making him smile as his eyes closed. It was the Pack's gesture of greeting and farewell, a sort of ritual scent-sharing. Unlike most of the Pack traditions, this one had been begun by the cubs. The adults had picked up on it, and now it was as standard a part of going out or coming home as a hug and kiss.

Maybe someday we should ask them how they came up with it. But it's probably been so long that they don't even remember anymore.

It was convenient, as well. One could scent-touch in places where one couldn't kiss. Such as here. Aletha brushed her fingers down her face again, then leaned forward and slid her hand around the side of the seat in front of her, to touch the face she knew was there.

"Mmm," said Sirius' voice. "Letha?"

"Right here."

"Are we there yet?"

Danger laughed quietly beside him. "You're worse than the cubs, Padfoot."

"I wouldn't know," Sirius said. "I didn't draw the losing straw. And I was asleep. So if you don't mind..."

"Sorry to wake you," Aletha said with humorous tartness in her voice. Losing straw indeed. I volunteered for this seat... the more fool I. But she understood perfectly. In fact, since the cubs were sleeping, she might just take a nap herself...

The airplane might be a bit cramped and noisy, but it was still a nicer place to sleep than Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. They had camped out in the kitchen, since Remus and Sirius' one expedition upstairs to the bedrooms had convinced them that the basement was the safest place to be. They'd conjured mattresses and slept den-style, both for warmth (even in the middle of the summer, it was cold in there) and for comfort.

Damn house-elf didn't help. I'm glad we got married Muggle-style, without a magical ceremony too – that would have tied the thing to me, and quite frankly, I don't want to be any closer to it than I have to.

Even normal house-elves gave Aletha a small fit of the creeps. (She had met them in the Hogwarts kitchens a few times, when Sirius had asked her to meet him there – it was a good place for rendezvousing, since not many students knew where it was, but it wasn't off limits per se.) Kreacher simply magnified her usual reaction beyond all reasonable bounds. Put bluntly, he frightened her, with a primal fear she couldn't quite understand.

Oh well. If I'm lucky, I never have to see him again. And if I'm not...

Burn that bridge when we come to it, as they don't say.

Aletha let her eyes drift shut and dreamed of a Den in the country, with a music room for her and a kitchen for Danger, with a library for Remus and a writing room for Sirius, with fields for the cubs to run in and other children for them to play with, and no need to run away or hide or be afraid, ever again...

The airport was large and complicated, but the signs were fairly easy to follow, and Amy Freeman was waiting for them at the arrivals gate, an intercontinental phone call having been part of the Pack's preparations. Aletha hugged her aunt and introduced her husband and daughter, and her husband's "brother" and his wife and children.

Danger liked Amy Freeman on sight. She was a distinguished looking woman, her white hair contrasting strikingly with her dark skin, and her face with more laugh lines than frown wrinkles. "Come on, you're

all tired, and we don't want to stand around here all day," she said after the introductions were complete. "Let's get going."

The formalities of entering the United States were duly completed, the baggage was claimed, and they took taxis to a hotel Amy had recommended to them as being decent both in room quality and price. They paid for three rooms, each with two double beds, and stowed their luggage there – Remus and Danger in one, Sirius and Letha in another, and the cubs in the third. Then Amy gave directions to the cab drivers, and they were soon at her apartment, small but pleasant and sun-filled.

"I'm not used to cooking for so many," Amy said, slicing mushrooms, "so you'll have to tell me how much is enough."

"I'm very used to it," Danger said, rolling her eyes. "And some of these people eat like you wouldn't believe. Want some help?"

"Certainly. Knives are right over there."

Sirius, to Amy's obvious surprise, found himself an apron and started washing the dishes that collected as the two women prepared the food. "Goes faster this way," he said in response to her questioning look. "And if I don't do it myself, I get dragged into it. I prefer making a choice."

"You have him trained well," Amy said with an approving look at Aletha, who was relaxing at the kitchen table with a glass of something brown and fizzy.

Amy wanted to know all about them, how they lived, where they worked, where the children went to school. She somehow didn't seem surprised to hear that they were homeschooled. "Mass education sometimes hurts more than it helps," she said. "Kids need to be with other kids, certainly, but they don't need to be cut off from everyone except their very own age."

"Ours are a little cut off as it is," Remus said, watching the cubs play in the living room. "We tend to stay close to home, and there weren't

many other children in our neighborhood, so they're better friends with each other than they are with anyone else. At least they didn't have any good friends they had to say goodbye to when we left."

Amy worked for a small bank, it developed, one in the business of staying small in an age of large corporations. "We haven't been bought out, merged with, or bankrupted so far," was the way she put it. "And our customers keep trusting us with their money. So we manage." She enjoyed Remus' stories about the grocery store, Danger's about the booksellers, and Aletha's carefully edited anecdotes about her middle-level bureaucracy job.

Her reaction when Sirius told her what he did for a living was a bit unexpected. "Under a female pen name?" Amy repeated, putting down her knife. "Do tell."

"Valentina Jett," Sirius said. "Romance novels, but clean ones, stuff we can read to the children – I started with period short stories, but I found I liked contemporary once I tried it."

"You're Valentina Jett?" Amy erupted into whoops of laughter. "Oh, that's priceless. One of my secretaries is crazy about you! Claims she's never found any other writer who understands a woman's heart and soul like you!"

"Yes, the press back home said much the same thing," Aletha said, grinning at her husband. " 'The truth of being a woman', wasn't it, love?"

"Oh, lay off," Sirius said, flicking water at Aletha. "Or come over here and do a few of these yourself."

"Why should I? You do such a good job."

"Do they do this often?" Amy asked Remus and Danger over Sirius and Aletha's good-natured wrangling.

"Only every day," Remus said with a long-suffering sigh.

“As if you don’t,” Aletha shot in his direction, then turned back to Sirius without missing a beat. “And I do not hog the bathroom.”

They talked all through dinner and into the evening, and said good night reluctantly. Amy had work the next day, but she had given them a list of places they might want to take the children, and had promised to take them to a baseball game herself on Thursday evening.

“And this weekend begins my vacation time,” she said. “There’s a little town a couple hours north of here where I usually go for my two weeks. It’s very restful, with some nice beaches and such. You’re welcome to come.”

“We’d love to,” Aletha said.

They went to the city’s amusement park the next day. There were lots of old-fashioned rides, including some nice old wooden roller coasters, and the cubs loved it. Their favorite was the one that had two roller coasters that raced against each other, so that you could ride in one and your friend in the other, and no one ever really knew which train would win. They rode that one six times (the Pack having wisely paid for all-day passes) before they got tired of it.

The day after that was the zoo. Before they went in, Remus had some last-minute instructions for the children, partially sparked by the previous day’s occurrences. “Harry, if you talk to the snakes, do it quietly, when no one else is around. Hermione, you may read the information on the signs, but not aloud. Draco, no comments on other people’s clothing. Meghan, stay with us, no running ahead. Everyone understand?”

Four heads nodded eagerly.

“Then off we go,” Danger said with a smile. “Four adults, four children, please.”

Harry did talk to the snakes, but as per orders, he kept it quiet. “Zoo snakes are usually boring anyways,” he told the other cubs later. “Either they want out, or they want to talk about how long it’s been

since they ate last, and what they had. They think humans look funny – they think we're here for them to look at, instead of the other way around."

"I guess we are, kind of," Hermione said thoughtfully.

"Capybara," Danger read from a sign in front of one exhibit. "Native to South America. World's Largest Rodent."

"So it's a really big rat?" Sirius said lazily, looking at the tawny thing as it gnawed a piece of wood.

Remus choked on his lemonade. "What?" Sirius said.

"World's Biggest Rat," Remus got out once he'd recovered. "Peter."

Sirius cracked up.

They stayed in the next day, sleeping late, swimming in the hotel's pool, letting the cubs watch television in their own room. The adults found other things to do.

"After all, it is a vacation," Aletha said lazily, trailing her fingers through Sirius' hair.

"Mm-hmm." Sirius reached up and caught her hand. "Never thought I'd be grateful to Snape, but if it wasn't for him, we wouldn't be here."

"I still don't want to be grateful to him," Aletha said a little more forcefully than she had intended. "Greasy bastard. Sneaking into our Den, scaring Neenie like that. Hope his parts still hurt."

"Oh, they will, if she hit him as hard as Remus says she did. But let's not think about him any more." Sirius turned his head toward his wife. "Let's think about us..."

"So, go over this one more time," Sirius said as they sat in their seats at the baseball park. "The man at bat has three tries to hit the ball. Right?"

“Not exactly. He has three strikes – pitches that he should have been able to hit – or four balls – pitches he probably couldn’t have hit.”

“And the umpire decides if a particular pitch is a strike or a ball,” Danger put in.

“Yes. Now, when a man’s at bat, three things can happen. Three strikes mean he’s out. Four balls means he gets a free walk to first base. Or he can hit the ball. If it’s caught in the air, or if someone on the other team gets the ball and touches the base the batter is heading for, then the batter’s out. If he gets to the base before either of those things happen, he’s safe.”

“And the batter’s objective is to get around the bases and score by touching home plate,” Remus said. “The team in the field wants to stop that from happening by getting three outs as quickly as possible.”

“That’s right.”

“And three outs from each team makes an inning,” Aletha concluded. “And nine innings, if the score isn’t tied, makes a game.”

“You’ve got it,” Amy said triumphantly. “That’s baseball in a nutshell. There’s other things that can happen, but we’ll get to those if they happen.”

“It’s worse than Quidditch,” Danger said quietly to Aletha.

“I’m sorry?” Amy had sharp ears for an older woman.

“Nothing.”

“All right. Would anyone care to learn how to keep box-score?”

Remus volunteered, and he and Amy soon had their heads together over a large piece of paper with a bunch of incomprehensible markings on it.

The American national anthem, with its rather ridiculous tune, was shrieked by a large woman in an amazingly ugly sequined gown, and the umpire shouted, "Play ball!"

"If you think baseball is hard to understand, don't ever try American football," Amy advised them between innings. "I once heard it described as a combination of the two worst facets of American culture: violence and committee meetings."

Danger laughed so hard that her drink went up her nose. "I needed my sinuses washed out anyway," she commented after she got done sneezing into a napkin.

At the seventh inning stretch, Amy taught them all how to do the YMCA dance, and when the home team pulled ahead with a two-run homer in the eighth and hung on to their lead for a win, the Pack cheered as loud as anyone.

Meghan slept through it all, having drifted off in her seat sometime in the fifth inning. Hermione joined her in the cab back to the hotel, and Draco and Harry didn't take long to fall asleep once they got into bed.

That was nice, Danger said as she turned off the shower. Did you have fun?

Yes. Box scoring is very interesting – describing an entire game with just a few numbers and symbols. Have to see if it can be adapted for Quidditch.

Probably not. Baseball has clearly defined parts of play, so there's time to keep the score, whereas Quidditch is a continuous play game. You'd have to have something that could keep up...

Like a magical score sheet? Remus suggested. I bet it could be done.

You and Sirius can discuss it to death tomorrow. Right now, I'm tired and I want to go to bed...

I'll see you there.

The Pack spent Friday at an interactive science center, which had lots of hands-on exhibits which the cubs could touch, play with, run around in, climb on, and investigate to their hearts' content. The floors were connected by huge ramps, which occupied Meghan for an hour to the exclusion of all else while she ran up and down, up and down, up and down. The Pack gave up trying to follow her and just stationed adults at each floor to watch her as she went by.

Amy had rented a large van to drive everyone north, and Friday evening saw the Pack loading their suitcases into the back of it. They had decided that they would stay only a week with Amy at her vacation spot before starting their own tour of America, so it made more sense to check out of their hotel in Amy's home city.

"Where do you think we should start?" Aletha asked her aunt as they lay on the beach Saturday morning, watching the older cubs play in the water. Danger reclined on a towel, keeping an eye on Meghan as she built a sand castle with two little girls about a year younger than she was, whose mothers had introduced them as Sarah and Jen. Remus and Sirius were both asleep in the sun, and Aletha hoped Sirius had remembered his sunscreen, because she didn't want to be treating him for sunburn for the next week.

"How long do you plan to stay?" Amy answered.

"Probably until around Christmas time."

"Then I'd say start up north. It's more bearable up there this time of year. Go to Canada for a while. See Niagara Falls, certainly. It's not too far from here."

"Should they be drinking that?" Aletha interrupted, pointing at Harry, who was tasting the water in his bucket.

“It shouldn’t hurt them. It is fresh, after all, and clean enough to swim in. I’d imagine they won’t like it very much, though. Now, where were we?”

“You were telling me where we should go.”

“Yes. I’d recommend the Midwest and the Rocky Mountains at this time of year as well. Then when fall comes, go to New England. Lovely area of the country. I went to school in Massachusetts, you know.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Now you do. Make sure to see the leaves turn, though if you travel there in the fall you can’t miss it. And then winter’s the time to travel in the South. The heat is more bearable then. What are those children doing?”

“Making trouble,” Aletha said, watching Harry, Draco, and Hermione coming up the beach, each carrying a full bucket of water. “They excel at it.”

“I wonder what they plan to do with those,” Amy said, a slight smile on her face. “Let’s watch, shall we?”
A shadow fell across Sirius. “Don’t even think about it,” he said without opening his eyes.

“Awww,” said three disappointed voices in unison.

Okay, what did I just foil? Sirius opened his eyes and surveyed the scene. Hmm, cubs, water, and me asleep... I have an idea.

“Moony’s still sleeping, you know,” he said casually.

Wicked grins blossomed on the three faces. Ever so carefully, they walked over to Remus and positioned themselves.
Wake up, dear, you’re about to have a shower.

Wha... Remus opened his eyes.

And quickly closed them again as three buckets of cold lake water drenched him.

Squeals of glee rang in his ears as he wiped his face.

So you want to play rough, do you?

“Of course you know, this means war,” he said, and grabbed Draco.

Harry and Hermione attacked him repeatedly as he hauled the yelling boy down the beach, but they couldn't take him down. He tossed Draco into the water and grabbed Hermione to do the same, when a hand yanked at one of his ankles. Taken by surprise, Remus went down hard, and the cubs swarmed him, splashing him and pushing him under as he did the same to them.

“Boys,” said Aletha with a sigh.

“And one girl,” her aunt rejoined. “A bit of a tomboy, isn't she?”

“Occasionally. What she is, is a full-time bookworm.”

“Good. Intelligent, strong, and not afraid to challenge the boys on their own ground. Very good.”

“I'll be sure to tell John and Danger that you approve,” Aletha said with a light laugh.

“Aunt Amy, why're we here?” Hermione asked as the cubs climbed the stairs to the front entrance of the brick building.

“Your parents need a day off from you, and I need a day with you,” Aunt Amy answered. “So I'm taking you to one of my favorite places.” She showed a small card to the man at the door.

“What is this place?” asked Draco, looking around. There were people in shorts and T-shirts using all different kinds of machines in the lobby.

“A gymnasium. People come here to get stronger.”

“Do we need to be stronger?” Harry asked.

“No, I don’t think so.” Aunt Amy laughed. “I come here for another reason.”

She led them down a hall at the back and turned left, opening a glass door.

“Oooh,” was the reaction from the cubs as the room was revealed.

It had a wooden floor and three mirrored walls. The wall that wasn’t a mirror had a wooden bar attached to it at about adult waist-height. There was a cabinet in the corner with some kind of machinery in it. Aunt Amy went over to it and started pressing buttons. “Take your shoes off,” she said over her shoulder. “This floor needs either special shoes or bare feet.”

Draco loved going barefoot. He kicked his shoes off eagerly and wiggled his toes. “What do we do here?” he asked.

A blast of music surprised everyone. “We dance,” Aunt Amy said, turning away from the stereo. “What else?”

“We don’t know how,” Harry said.

“This isn’t a formal dance with steps. It’s something you do on your own. Like this.”

Aunt Amy began to move. First she swayed standing still, then she took small steps, then suddenly she leaped into the air. It didn’t look like anything Draco had ever seen.

It was pretty, though. He liked it.

He started trying to move with the music. It was harder than it looked. Sometimes the music did things he wasn’t expecting, and he had to fix what he was doing to match it.

Harry took running leaps, twirling wildly around. Once, he fell to the floor right at Aunt Amy's feet. She leaned down and pulled him up, brushing his hair back from his eyes and laughing.

Hermione was taking small, stiff steps. "Be loose, Neenie," Aunt Amy called. "Be loose and let the music tell you what to do."

Draco got a silly impulse. He bowed to Hermione. "Madam, may I have this dance?"

"My pleasure," said Neenie, curtsying, like Danger did when Moony bowed to her that way. They put their arms around each other and tried to imitate their Pack-parents' dancing. Harry stopped what he was doing to laugh, and after the fourth time they'd stepped on each other's toes, Draco and Hermione were laughing too.

Harry looked past them and stopped laughing. "Look at Meghan," he said quietly.

Draco turned around. Meghan was dancing by herself in the middle of the floor with a funny look on her face. It was a look Draco had seen before, but never on his little sister. He had seen it on Harry, while he was flying, and on Neenie, while she sat in her tree and read. Letha said he looked that way when he sang.

"She's a natural," Aunt Amy said softly. "She's got the gift. She's beautiful."

Watching Meghan sway perfectly in time with the music, Draco agreed.

On their last night with Amy, she insisted on treating them all to a bottle of champagne. The cubs each took a tiny sip and made a face, though Draco wanted to try it again. The adults laughed and put their glasses aside until the cubs had gone to bed.

"There is something I've been wanting to ask you," Amy said, running her finger around the rim of her glass and making it ring.

“Go ahead,” Sirius said, putting his arm around Aletha’s shoulders.

“Are you aware that my boss is approximately three and a half feet tall and named Landog?”

“Er, no, we weren’t,” Danger said, exchanging puzzled looks with Sirius and Aletha. Should this mean something?

Yes. “You’re a witch,” Remus said bluntly. “Aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Amy lifted her glass. “Well done, sir.”

“And you work for the American equivalent of Gringotts,” Remus said, nodding. “Wizard/Muggle relations are a little different in America, if I understand correctly. It’s harder to find places Muggles can’t go. So most wizarding businesses look like Muggle ones, at least on the surface – do I have this right?”

“You do indeed,” Amy said approvingly.

“They have to be able to handle the accidental Muggle coming in off the street. So they need human tellers. And I’d imagine, over the years, humans have worked their way up in the hierarchy...”

“I am the highest-ranked human currently working at Noxet Bank,” Amy said in a bland tone, but Danger noticed that she had transferred her glass into her left hand, and her right was working its way into her pocket.

Watch her, she may have a wand, she warned Remus.

“That gives me certain privileges the other employees do not have. Such as the right to examine the bank’s records, even request – and receive – records from other banks.”

“Goblins don’t show their records to anyone, not even the Ministry of Magic,” Sirius said. “They take pride in it.”

“Landog trusts me,” Amy said. “As I trusted you. Until the other day when your Harry fell down in front of me, and I helped him up and got a good look at his face.”

Sirius casually slid his hand into his own pocket.

“An interesting scar on his forehead. So interesting, it made me Apparate back to headquarters and do some research into recent British history. I found the name Harry Potter – hardly an unknown name in the United States, or anywhere else in the world, I should think – linked with one Sirius Black, who resembles my niece’s husband quite closely, and who is supposed to have betrayed the child’s parents, killed a dozen or so people, broken jail, stolen the boy, and vanished.”

Amy’s eyes fell on Sirius. “How surprised I was, then, to find frequent withdrawal notices from his personal vault, including quite a large one within the last two weeks, with a note that the woman doing the withdrawing – whose description matches my niece quite well – had wanted it changed into Muggle money.”

“You say he was ‘supposed to have’ done all those things,” Remus mentioned, drawing Amy’s attention away from Sirius for a moment. “Do you disbelieve what the newspapers have to say?”

“Shall we say, I give Aletha credit for having better sense than to marry the man the newspapers depicted,” Amy answered calmly. “And you certainly don’t act like a mass murderer,” she said to Sirius. “But I have a feeling there is a story here I would simply adore hearing.”

Well, there’s one good thing, Danger said privately to Remus. By the time we can actually come out of hiding, we’ll be used to telling this story.

I don’t think I’ll ever get used to this story, and I lived the damn thing.

“You told me you went to school in Massachusetts,” Aletha was saying. “You meant the Salem Witches’ Institute.”

“I did. Lovely place, Salem. Shame about the history. I must admit, you piqued my curiosity at the baseball game, when I heard you mention Quidditch,” she said to Danger. “I assume all of you went to Hogwarts.”

“Not Danger,” Sirius said. “But that’s part of the story.”

“Tell on, then.” Amy inclined her head. “If you would be so kind. The night is young and the bottle is still mostly full.”

“This story will remedy both conditions,” Remus said dryly. “I suppose I should start. It began on 15 March, 1982, in a park in a place called Little Whinging...”

“I have some recommendations for your reestablishment,” Amy said the next morning over breakfast. “Had you considered claiming a Canadian alma mater? It would explain why no one knows you from Hogwarts.”

“That’s a good idea,” Aletha said. “Any suggestions?”

“Yes. The Vancouver Magical Academy, or VMA for short. It’s an excellent school, if a bit on the small side – some of the students who might go there go to Golden Gate in San Francisco instead. You can visit it on your trip and get to know the campus, just in case you run into someone who’s actually been there.”

“That makes sense,” said Remus, catching Meghan as she threatened to fall out of her chair. “Anything else?”

“Hide that damn scar, obviously,” Amy said feelingly. “Anyone could see it the way it is. Harry, come here.”

Harry came around the table, a little nervously. “This won’t hurt,” Amy told him. “Just hold still.”

She waved her wand around his head. His skin went several tones darker than its normal color, as if he had just got an extreme suntan.

“And a small additional charm on the forehead,” Amy said half to herself, “and there!”

Harry looked down at his chocolate-brown hands with wide eyes.

“Now he’s yours, Aletha, Sirius,” Amy said. “Harry Black, Meghan’s older brother, Draco and Hermione’s cousin. And that takes care of your other problem, which is three children the same age, who look nothing alike, in one family. Someone’s going to suspect something. Your story about triplets won’t hold up.”

“But twins and a same-age cousin aren’t nearly so rare,” Danger said in satisfaction. “It’s perfect.”

“And we should start today,” Remus said. “Show me how to do that again.”

“I’ll work on altering our papers,” Aletha said.

“I’ll help,” Sirius said quickly.

“And I get stuck with the dishes,” Danger muttered, but without any real anger. “Come on, Hermione, Draco, let’s get this done.”

“I help too,” Meghan said, picking up a plate.

“Yes, of course, Meg. You help too.”

Meghan danced as she carried dishes to the sink in the hotel suite’s tiny kitchenette.

(A/N: OK, go ahead and speculate on where in America they are. I probably won’t tell you if you’re right or not. But I might. Not you, marathonerobsessed, you already know. And that was us, ladies and gentlemen, marathonerobsessed and me, building a sand castle with Meghan Black on the beach! (I hope that doesn’t break any rules – that will be our only appearance, really and truly.)

Chapter 32, coming soon: “But I Wouldn’t Want to Stay”, in which our heroes return to their native land and establish a new Den... in a little village in Devon... stay tuned!)

Chapter 32: But I Wouldn't Want to Stay

On the night of 29 December, Albus Dumbledore received a rather petite letter, only about four inches long and two high. Minerva McGonagall, who was with him when it arrived, noticed a look of regret on his face as he took it from the owl.

“What’s wrong, Albus?”

“Oh, nothing. I was merely hoping for some photographs, and I see they have not yet come.”

“From our... mutual friends?”

“Indeed. And I must say, Minerva, while we are on the subject, that was quite the loaded speech you gave Severus at our end-of-term staff meeting.”

Minerva sighed. “I suppose I couldn’t resist. I’ve been wanting for so long to catch him on something – him with his attitude of Slytherin perfection. He just irritates me. It was not that long ago that he was my student, and now, he calls me by my first name, he never misses an opportunity to point out what I or my students have done wrong – at least he’s had no complaints as of yet about the newest Weasley boy, I thought it would be inevitable considering his attitude about the rest of the family...”

Dumbledore smiled reflectively, opening his letter. “Percy Weasley does seem the type to get along with Severus, if such a thing is possible. A rule-follower to the extreme. His brothers, now – ah.”

“What?”

“Enclosures. One for you.” He handed her a small folded piece of air-mail paper. “And one for Hagrid. I think I will save that for the day after tomorrow...”

Dumbledore and Hagrid had a New Year’s Eve tradition which they had observed for quite a long time. They had lunch together in

Dumbledore's office, followed by tea at Hagrid's house. During the meals, and in the time between, they discussed the year past and the year to come.

“And, surprisingly enough, one for Severus. I do hope it doesn't contain taunts.”

Minerva rolled her eyes. “And you know perfectly well it probably does.”

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

Merry Christmas, as they say State-side. Sorry this letter's late, but mail is heavy this time of year. Also sorry that it's not as bulky as you probably wanted, but it is air-mail, and that's expensive. Not to mention risky.

But not to worry – we took loads of photographs, and you can get them easily. They're waiting for you at the New Orleans School of Magic. Principal West says she'd love to have you drop in for a cup of tea any time.

We are all well, and hope you are the same. We'll see you when we see you.

With wishes for a pleasant New Year,

GGL

Dear Professor McGonagall,

Professor Hunkele of the Vancouver Magical Academy sends his greetings. So do we, of course, but I wanted to be sure I wouldn't forget about the good Professor.

Anyway, a Merry Christmas to you, and a Happy New Year. Just think – only three and three-quarter years left before you get to start teaching our wonderful children! Doesn't that make you want to beam with pride? Or possibly run away screaming?

Well, whichever it is, do it in health, and with our best wishes.

Happy Holidays,

GGL

Severus Snape looked with distaste at his letter. Knowing who sent this to me does not make it easier to take.

He was tempted simply to throw it away unread. But they will probably have placed some sort of spell on it similar to that thrice-damned plaque, so I might as well get it over with now...

He tore open the envelope and pulled out the contents.

Dear Professor Snape,

Merry Christmas. We hope you are feeling well. We would like to thank you for making our trip to America possible. Please don't do it again. Have a Happy New Year.

There was no signature.

Snape read it over twice, then tossed it into his fire and went to get himself a drink.

"Please don't do it again" indeed. If I never see any of them again, it will be too soon.

Dumbledore Apparated to New Orleans the next day (he was one of the few living wizards who could, and did, treat Apparating across oceans as an everyday occurrence) and visited with Joanna West, the principal of the New Orleans School of Magic.

"Very nice young people Hogwarts is turning out these days, Albus," she said over tea. "So polite. And so nice to see them happily married and having children – you need some population boost over there, with that war having scared everyone out of the baby business..."

Dumbledore sighed. "I agree. Hogwarts is sadly diminished from what it once was."

“Only in size,” Joanna said. “Not in quality of teaching, I’m sure. My last exchange student said she learned more about potions in two weeks with your Potions Master than she did in a whole semester here.” She frowned. “But she also mentioned a bit of a personality clash...”

“Nearly everyone’s personalities clash with Severus Snape’s,” Dumbledore said lightly. “I have a feeling that is the way he prefers it.”

“Oh, well, you get some people like that,” Joanna said sagely. “Have a cookie? Made them myself...”

The package was small, but filled literally to the brim with photographs. The Pack must have taken ten rolls of film in the six months they had been gone, Dumbledore thought, browsing through the pictures. They were Muggle-style, of course, in color with no movement, but he could still see the faces he loved. With a few minor changes, and one great one.

I see they have given Harry darker skin, so that he will appear to be Aletha’s son, I have no doubt. He nodded. A wise choice. Two children in each family is far less likely to be remarked upon.

There was, though, no note with the pictures, and that bothered Dumbledore. I do hope they plan to return soon...

As he did every year, Hagrid arrived at Dumbledore’s office around noon on New Year’s Eve, ready for lunch and their usual talk. This year, however, there was one topic in particular on both their minds that neither of them wanted to bring up. So they talked around it all through lunch and the hours afterwards. It was just as they were getting ready to go outdoors that Dumbledore said, casually, “Hagrid, I believe I have something here for you. It must have reached me by mistake.”

He handed the gamekeeper an envelope and turned away. In a small mirror mounted behind his desk, he saw Hagrid beam as he recognized the handwriting on the envelope, and carefully tuck it away in a pocket of his overcoat.

“Sent ‘em all t’gether, then,” Hagrid said as if to himself as the two went down the stairs. “Tha’s smart, that is. Keep ‘em from gettin’ lost.”

“Or intercepted,” Dumbledore said quietly. Hagrid nodded, and they were silent for a few moments as they descended the marble staircase and crossed the entrance hall.

Hagrid spoke again as they emerged into the bright light of a sunny winter day. “Wouldn’ happen t’know... if they’re comin’ back any time soon, would yeh, sir?”

“Sadly, my correspondent was silent on that issue, I suspect deliberately so. I have a feeling your letter will be similarly uncommunicative. But one can hardly blame them, given the events of July, for wishing to keep their affairs a bit more secret than they previously have.”

Hagrid sighed. “True... true.”

“You miss them.” It was not a question.

“I do. I miss talkin’ with ‘em, an’ watchin’ the little’uns playin’ an’ roughhousin’ like they do... yeh’ve seen ‘em, sir, yeh know how they get...” Hagrid shook his head. “It’s jus’ hard, not knowin’.”

“I agree. But we must remember, Hagrid, that although they seem young to us, our friends are adults and free to make their own choices. Those choices might even include staying where they currently are for some time, as difficult as that is for us to think of.”

“They wouldn’ stay over there,” Hagrid said in shock. “Not them. They wouldn’ keep little – er – their boy off in a foreign place tha’ way.”

“It is only a possibility, Hagrid, and one I tend to discount. The general tenor of their letters leads me to believe that they will, in fact, be returning at some point.”

Hagrid nodded. "Hope it's soon." He mounted his front steps, sweeping the snow from them, and pulled open his front door. Fang lifted his head sleepily, then flopped back down in his basket.

"Has Fang gained weight?" Dumbledore asked, pulling back the curtains with a wave of his wand. How odd. I wonder why they were drawn?

"Don' think so. Why?"

Dumbledore got a better look at the large black mass of fur in the basket. "Ah, never mind. A trick of the light." And that would be why. Casually, he lit the lamps and closed the curtains again. Better safe than sorry.

Hagrid poked up the fire and added some small sticks. Once they had caught, he added a Magical Fire-Log ("Catches instantly, burns for hours!") and hung the teakettle on the hob. Dumbledore took the opportunity to scan the room.

As I expected. That closet is not entirely closed. Ah, and the bureau is farther from the wall than I remember... and the bed looks rather interesting...

"Tell me, Hagrid, was there not once a rumor that you kept werewolf cubs under your bed?"

Hagrid laughed. "Ah, now, Professor, yeh know tha' wasn' true."

" Really?" Dumbledore asked, his eyes twinkling. "Have you checked?"

"Checked?" Hagrid straightened up, looking confused. "Checked where?"

"Under your bed."

"Fer... werewolf cubs?"

“Yes. I think you ought to check now.”

Hagrid looked bewildered for one more second, then his eyes lit with understanding. “Per’aps I oughta,” he said with a grin, and was across the cabin and reaching under the bed almost faster than Dumbledore could follow.

I always forget that Hagrid’s bulk is deceptive – he can move quite quickly when he wishes to.

There was a shriek from under the bed, followed by giggles. Hagrid pulled his arm back out with Hermione Granger clinging to his hand, squealing happily. Harry Potter and Draco and Meghan Black exploded out from the other sides of the bed and mobbed Hagrid, hugging every part of him they could reach.

“An’ wha’ were yeh doin’ under there?” Hagrid mock-angrily demanded of the cubs, standing up and putting his hands on his hips.

“Hiding,” Harry said with his insouciant smile.

“Where’s yer parents?”

“Hiding,” Draco said, relinquishing his hold on Hagrid’s arm and dropping to the floor. “Hi, Professor Dumbledore.”

“Hi, Professor,” the other cubs chorused.

“Hello, children,” Dumbledore said, looking them over. They seemed much the same as ever, with one noticeable exception – Harry was wearing glasses, round-lensed with black plastic frames. I would imagine they have been charmed to be Unbreakable, considering his penchant for flying and climbing things.

“Yes, hello, Professor, hello, Hagrid,” said Aletha, coming out from behind the bureau. Dumbledore noticed as usual the woman’s signature style, a seemingly impossible combination of dignity and playfulness, so that everything she did appeared both sophisticated

and unrehearsed. “Hermione Granger, get down this instant – Hagrid is not a tree.”

“Aw, she kin climb on me if she wants ta,” Hagrid said, beaming proudly at Neenie, who was perched on his shoulder. “Where’s ev’ryone else?”

Someone sneezed in the closet.

“They’ll be out as soon as they finish playing guitar,” Aletha said with a straight face.

Hagrid looked confused. “Playin’ guitar?”

“That’s what they call it in Arizona,” said a bearded man, standing up in Fang’s corner. It took Dumbledore a moment to recognize Sirius. “And that’s where we left from, Phoenix, Arizona. Didn’t take you long, Headmaster. I win for once,” he called toward the closet.

“I should have known better than to bet against you, Professor,” said Remus, opening the closet door from inside. “And for your information, Letha, we were not ‘playing guitar’ in there.”

“We weren’t?” Danger said dreamily from behind him. “Can we not do it again, then?”

Hagrid laughed at this. “Yeh hid in Fang’s basket,” he said to Sirius. “Tha’s why Professor Dumbledore asked if he gained weight.”

“That I did. I have to admit, Hagrid, we were hoping you’d come back alone and we could surprise you.”

“Trus’ me, yeh surprised me plenty,” Hagrid said, lifting Hermione down from his shoulder. “I gotta get ter the tea, sweetie, yeh go on now...”

“When did you get back?” Dumbledore asked Remus.

“Last night. We got rooms in London and Floored into Hogsmeade this morning.”

“And oh, do we ever have stories,” Danger said, her eyes dancing. “I hope neither of you have anywhere to be.”

“Nowhere but here,” Dumbledore said with a smile.

I had forgotten how invigorating the presence of the Pack is. They take such obvious delight in life that it is difficult venturing on impossible not to join them in their joy.

And since there is no reason not to...

He sat back in his chair, a signal to the cubs that his lap was available for sitting on. Harry got there first, but Meghan was a close second. Neenie was busy petting Fang, and Draco was under the table, doing heaven only knew what.

“Well, for one thing, my family appears to have been more secretive than I ever knew,” Aletha said with a rueful smile. “You know that we went to visit my aunt, Professor. She was my father’s older sister by quite a few years, she’s in her early sixties. Apparently, she and her parents managed to keep secret from my father the exact nature of the boarding school she attended. The all-girls boarding school in Massachusetts.”

“Your father’s sister... not the Amy Freeman who is influential at Noxet Bank?” Dumbledore asked.

“The same. And she caught us out – luckily, all she wanted to know was the truth, and she was willing to believe it.”

“We were careless,” Remus said, glancing at Harry. “We won’t make that mistake again.”

“On that subject,” Dumbledore said, “where are you planning to live now – and under what names, if I may ask such an indiscreet question?”

“We’re all Blacks now,” Aletha said. “Patrick and Carrie with Harry and Meghan, and John and Gertrude with Drake and Hermione. Pat and John are fraternal twins, born in England but raised in Canada, alumni of VMA in British Columbia, and such loving brothers that they never did anything apart, not even get married. And since their wives happened to be best friends, it suited them, and their paychecks, all just fine to share a house.”

“It was a happy coincidence that both ladies became pregnant at the same time,” Danger added. “The twins were born just a few days before Harry, and they’ve done everything together ever since.”

“And because Harry Black will have the same skin tone as his sister and his mother,” Sirius finished, “why would anyone have reason to suspect he’s actually Harry Potter?”

Hagrid chuckled, bringing the teapot to the table. “Hidin’ in plain sight – usin’ yer real last name an’ all!”

“We’re hoping the Aurors think we’d never be that stupid,” Remus said. “As to where, we haven’t decided yet – suggestions are welcome, Professor. But we would like a small town or village, if we can. The cubs need some space to run in. And if there happened to be a magical family around with children near their age...”

“ They could use some friends,” Danger said. “Other than themselves. They’re very close to each other, of course, but new friends would be good for them.” She made a face. “We had a very interesting conversation one full moon night.”

Den-nights, by definition, were times to be Pack. Part of being Pack was knowing the Pack stories, knowing how the Pack had come to be and what had made its members who they were, the good things and the bad both. The adults all knew the stories, of course, having lived them. But the cubs needed to be told. Den-nights had become the time for telling them.

Many of the stories were troubling. Normal families might have balked at telling their children such things. But the adults were in agreement

– the cubs had to know. It was better for them to hear and learn about frightening things while they were safe in their Den, with their Pack around them, than for them to be surprised by those same frightening things in real life, when there might be no one there to help them.

So the cubs all knew the story of Wormtail and his betrayal, and how Hermione and Danger's parents had died. They knew that they would someday meet a boy named Neville, the same age as the older three, whose parents did not know him because of Death Eaters. And they knew the name of Voldemort, and did not fear to speak it.

Telling the stories had another advantage – stories about the bad times the cubs themselves had experienced brought old fears to the surface, letting the cubs remember the fear, recognize it, and make a choice to fight against it. Harry still shivered when the story of the night he was rescued was told, but it no longer paralyzed him as it had done on its first telling, and it had taken Draco five den-nights, but he had finally been able to keep from diving under the blankets whenever someone mentioned his birth-father's name.

The occurrences with Snape and Neenie were still too recent to have become a story yet, for which Danger was privately thankful. She knew what was likely to happen when it did.

Just when we'd got her to stop, too. She hasn't sucked her thumb in months. Not since it actually happened.

Oh well. At least it's not dangerous, destructive, or overly disgusting.

On this particular den-night, one of the stories being told was about what Lucius Malfoy had said to the Pack while he had them imprisoned. They had just reached the part about the Imperius Curse not being illegal on non-humans, when Draco had a question.

“What's a humans?”

This should be interesting.

Shut up.

Temper, temper...

“Human is the word for people who look like us, Draco. People with two legs and two arms, who don’t have wings or tails or fur all the time. Wizards and Muggles are human, and men and women and boys and girls are all human. Understand?”

Draco nodded.

“Are we human?” Harry asked.

“Yes, of course we are,” Danger said, confused. What else would he think we were?

I have a feeling...

Harry shook his head. “Uh-uh. We’re Pack.”

What did I tell you? Remus said, lightly, but with a slight edge.

You knew. You knew this was coming.

No, but I suspected. It’s not as bad as it sounds, love. They don’t think they’re any better or worse than the rest of the world, just different, and they’ve grown up knowing that – don’t get too worked up about terminology.

Well, I’m not letting them get away with thinking they’re not human. “Yes, Harry, we’re Pack. But we’re human too.”

“Even Moony?” Neenie asked.

“Even Moony,” Sirius said. “Except very early in the morning, before he has his tea.”

The werewolf growled lightly at Sirius.

“Then Lucius was wrong,” Draco said with an air of relief.

“In the real world, yes, he was wrong,” Danger said. “But I’m not so sure about legality. Letha, do you know?”

“The law’s complicated,” Aletha said with a sigh. “Supposedly, except on full-moon nights, werewolves are considered human – otherwise, Remus could never have gone to school or even bought a wand. But there is a deep-set prejudice against them in the magical world, and some rights are denied to them – they can’t vote, and they can’t legally adopt, not magically, anyway.”

“Good thing we did it the Muggle way, then,” Danger said, rubbing Remus’ head just behind his ears.

“Did what?” Sirius asked.

“When we got married, I transferred Neenie’s custody to the two of us, jointly. Since Muggle law doesn’t even know there is such a thing as lycanthropy, it wasn’t a problem.”

Remus laughed wolf-style, a sound like a cross between a cough and a bark. And since you were supposedly still a Muggle at the time, it should hold up in court, if we ever have to take it there.

Doesn’t matter. She’s mine, end of story, and the court has no say over whom we share our lives with.

Well, it might have something to say about the fact that technically, we’re all criminals. Kidnapping, both Harry and Draco – aiding and abetting a fugitive – actually helping him escape, in my case. If they abide by the letter of the law, even if Sirius’ name is cleared, we could all be sent to Azkaban.

Danger shivered. And isn’t that a pleasant thought. How did this conversation get so cheerful, anyway?

It’s all your fault.

How do you figure?

Everything's your fault. You know that.

Danger growled and punched her husband on the shoulder. Jerk.

And don't you forget it.

"America is similar to England in a lot of ways," Aletha recalled. "We speak the same language, more or less. People are a little more relaxed there, and you have to remember to look the other way when you're crossing the street – we almost got run over more than once before we got that down."

"But it's people trying to make their way in life, just like anywhere else," Remus said. "We fit right in. Just another bunch of tourists, stay a few days here, a few days there, pay our bills and go."

"We spent a week or so in New York City," Sirius said. "Exciting place. Wouldn't want to live there, though. But they do have some good pizza."

"Is food all you ever think about?" asked Aletha jokingly.

"No. I think about you a lot."

"What do you think about me?"

"That no matter what side of the ocean we're on, you're still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"Nice recovery," Danger said approvingly.

"They also have good theater in New York," Aletha said. "We went to a couple of matinees. Musicals, things the cubs would enjoy."

"And we visited a few places your average tourist wouldn't get to see," said Remus. "I think we saw most of the magical schools in North America, at least to the point of walking around their campuses."

“We spent three days studying the Vancouver Magical Academy,” Danger said. “To make sure we know enough about it to be able to say we went there.”

“Yes, how is Muggle travel across the US/Canada border these days?” Dumbledore asked.

“Very easy,” Sirius said. “We showed them our passports, all legally stamped and signed, and they let us across with no trouble at all.”

“Having no idea, of course, that said passports were absolutely and totally fake,” Aletha said with a grin. “Muggles are so easy to fool. If you have the right piece of paper, they’ll let you do anything.”

“Wizards don’t even need a piece of paper,” Sirius said, the laughter dying out of his face. “Just a story.”

Aletha winced. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. Danger broke it. “And then, of course, there was the time Sirius decided he needed something new to wear. Something warm, since it was chilly. So he walked into a store and said...”

“Oh, do you have to bring this up?” Sirius groaned.

“Whose fault is it that you didn’t bother to find out if the word means something different in America than it does here?” asked Remus. “The look on that saleslady’s face was wonderful.”

“And you might look cute in an American jumper,” Aletha said, grinning. “I’ll keep it in mind for future April Fool’s Days.”

“I am so dead,” Sirius said to the ceiling. “Why couldn’t I have had the sense to fall in love with someone who didn’t prank?”

“You wouldn’t be able to stand anyone who didn’t prank,” Aletha countered. “And she wouldn’t be able to stand you.”

“So wha’s ‘jumper’ mean in America?” Hagrid asked.

“A dress,” Remus said. “A dress without sleeves, to be worn over a shirt.”

“And usually worn only by girls Neenie’s age and under,” Danger finished.

Hagrid guffawed. Sirius flushed and dropped his teaspoon, disappearing under the table to get it.

When Danger next stood up, an hour or so later, she yelped and sat quickly back down. “Someone,” she said with a glare at Sirius, “has tied my shoelaces to the table leg.”

“Not me,” Sirius said, raising his hands.

Danger scanned the cubs’ faces. “Draco,” she said after a moment. “You did it, didn’t you?”

The boy flushed ever so slightly and nodded.

“Very neatly done,” Danger said. “I never even felt you do it. Good work. Fix it now, and don’t do it again.”

Draco crawled under the table. “All done,” he called a moment later. Danger rose, carefully, and stepped away from the table.

Remus stood up – and fell down, landing with a crash on the floor.

“Now that, I did,” Sirius said triumphantly.

“I’d hurt you if I could reach you,” Remus growled. “Help me up here, Danger?”

“Why? You seem to be doing so well on your own.”

Minerva McGonagall was enjoying her holiday. It wasn’t often she gave herself an entire day off. With a glass of white wine in one hand, the latest issue of Transfiguration Today in the other, and her feet up,

she was not expecting, and did not at all care for, the knock on her door.

Oh, now what. “Come in,” she called brusquely without bothering to turn around.

“Happy New Year, Professor,” chorused four small voices.

Minerva was on her feet and across the room in a flash, overjoyed to see the children and amazed at the strength of her own reaction. “Good heavens, look at you! You’ve grown!”

“They never stop,” said Remus Lupin with a smile as he entered the room behind his children. “Hello, Professor.”

“Heavens, Remus, if Severus Snape can call me Minerva, you certainly may.” She shook hands with him, with Sirius (whom she almost didn’t recognize, with his beard – and that is the point, after all), with Aletha and Danger, and exclaimed over the children. “Harry, you have glasses. And what’s happened to your skin?”

“It’s my new out-of-den face, Professor,” Harry said proudly. “We all have them. See?”

Minerva nodded, looking the children over. “I do see.” She tapped her finger against her lips, aware she was being tested by these fascinating, unusual children. “Hermione, your hair is lighter than it was, and straighter too.”

Neenie nodded, smiling shyly.

“Draco, yours is darker, with a hint of red – quite handsome, I must say.”

The boy’s face lit up with the smile that was his best disguise, as it completely obliterated all resemblance to his father, who would never have countenanced such a display of vulgar emotion.

“And Meghan – such pretty braids. Just like your mother’s.”

Meghan giggled and rubbed her head, obviously not quite used to the feeling of her hair in the tight braids yet.

“As observant as ever, Pro – er – Minerva,” Aletha said. “How have you been?”

They talked for a short time, catching up, until Sirius had to physically remove Harry from the small table in the corner, which he had been about to jump off. “We should go,” he said, setting the boy on the floor. “Before they move on to destroying things.”

“That would be nice,” Minerva said with a touch of acidity which she didn’t really mean. In truth, she owned very little that she was greatly attached to, and she valued the friendships she had made with the Pack far more than her things.

But, still, repairing things or buying new ones was a bit of a nuisance.

“We’ll write you when we get settled,” Danger promised. “We have a few houses we’re looking at already, so it shouldn’t be long.”

“My door is always open to you,” Minerva said, and meant it. I came to know them through my own rash actions. The least I can do is offer them help if they should ever need it.

Unlike certain others I could name...

Severus Snape was perfectly well aware of who was in the castle. He simply chose not to acknowledge the fact.

It would serve no rational purpose to face them now. I must wait until I have more strength, more knowledge. And until I have recovered from that most humiliating defeat.

But he had to admit that it was possible he would never recover, that the Marauders had won...

No. I do not have to admit anything of the kind. They won that round, that is all. I must win the next.

I wonder how, and when, and where it will be played?

On 13 January, a small village in Devon grew by eight people, all with the surname Black.

On 14 January, the new residents received a visit from Mrs. Edith Miller, the town gossip.

“... and it’s just more than human flesh can bear,” she said for the tenth time in her visit, “the way these young people behave these days...”

Danger and Aletha nodded sympathetically. Remus and Sirius, probably wisely, had made their excuses and escaped the kitchen. The cubs were also absent – the older three had gone outdoors to explore the neighborhood, and Meghan was upstairs playing in the large bedroom they still insisted on sharing – though, thank heaven, we talked them into separate beds. All we’d need is one hint of “boys and girls sharing beds” for our names to be toast.

“... and then that strange family who live just south of town, with all their funny noises, and that strange black ball that little Eddie Keaton said he saw flying around all by itself, though goodness knows he’s only ten and children that age lie like rugs...”

A black ball that flies around by itself? Keep her talking about that.

Not a problem.

“... all those boys, good heavens, and I don’t know where she buys food for them all, it’s certainly not in town here, but really, that whole family, and all with the red hair so you can see them coming a mile away...”

Hmm, a large, red-haired family, with a reputation for being isolated and unusual... I wonder...

Danger blinked suddenly. Remus – which way did the cubs go?

I'm not sure – Hermione saw a grove of trees up on a hill, she wanted to see if any of them were good for climbing, and Harry and Draco went with her...

“... in that old orchard on the hill, well after all they do own it, but they're up there all the time in the summer, doing heaven knows what, yelling and screaming like maniacs...”

Danger smiled to herself.

I have a good feeling about this.

(A/N: Well, no one got their location in the US. I can't say I'm all that sorry... means I did my job right... Still taking guesses, though!

About Harry's glasses: I got mine around the age of seven or eight, as did most people I know who wear them. Oh yes, and Minerva's comment at the beginning of the chapter about the staff meeting... would anyone like to see that? Another one-shot, perhaps?

Next chapter, yes, ladies and gentlemen, here he comes at last – Ronald Weasley co-stars with our favorite cubs in “This Changes Everything”. Don't forget to review!)

Chapter 33: This Changes Everything

Ron Weasley lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling.

I'm so bored, he chanted to himself. I'm so bored.

Dad was at work. Mum was bustling around the kitchen like always. Bill, Charlie, and Percy were at Hogwarts, Fred and George were outside somewhere, probably snowballing each other, and Ginny was down in her room with Loony Lovegood, having a tea party.

And I can't tell Mum I'm bored. Mum has one cure for boredom – chores.

Ron came to a decision. I'll go up to the orchard. If I'm careful, I can avoid the twins. And I might find something to do out there. Anything's better than just lying here.

He got up and went down the stairs, carefully skirting the door with the giggles coming from behind it. He wondered why anyone would want to make such a strange, high-pitched noise anyway. Girls were weird.

He retrieved his snow gear from the closet and climbed into it, automatically fixing the one strap on his overalls that always came undone and Spellotaping shut the boot that didn't have a fastener anymore. Maybe, if I hurry, I can get out before...

"There you are!" Mrs. Weasley came out of the kitchen and surveyed her youngest son. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Out," Ron said, hoping to get away with it.

"Out where?"

"Just up to the orchard."

"Well, all right. I'll call you when it's time for lunch. Behave yourself, now."

“Yes, Mum,” Ron said, hurrying out the door before she could change her mind.

My poor little boy, Molly Weasley thought sadly, watching Ron go. How much I wish you had a friend.

Just one.

Harry Potter threw a snowball at one of the trees, just to hear the solid thump and watch the white splotch appear on the trunk. I like it here. Lots of space to run in, lots of snow to play in. The only thing that could make it better would be someone new to talk to...

Draco was lying down in the snow nearby, staring at the sky. Probably looking at the clouds. He likes doing stuff like that.

They had lost sight of Hermione, who had run ahead. She was most likely up one of the trees right now. Reading that book I saw in her coat pocket.

He fired another snowball at a tree, a big fat old monster. It struck with a hollow thud.

Ron looked for footprints in the snow and saw with relief that the only tramped path led in the opposite direction of where he was headed. So I ought to be alone.

Alone. He sighed as he walked. I am alone. Most of the time, anyway. Except when the twins need a guinea pig for an experiment or want somebody to tease.

He remembered another day at the orchard, a summer day, when he had been thinking much the same things. And I wished I had friends. But that was years ago, and nothing's ever happened. I never even saw that boy again. What was his name – oh, I can't even remember any more. And I don't want to ask Mum about him, because that would be nagging.

He arrived at the orchard and leaned his forehead against a tree.

I guess wishes don't come true. Not even for wizards.

“GET DOWN!” a high-pitched voice screamed from above him.

Ron dropped to the ground instantly. A snowball whizzed over his head and hit the tree trunk, exactly where his head had been a moment before. Somebody swore behind him. He rolled over into a sitting position in time to see another snowball go by, in the opposite direction, and score on the back of one of the twins, both of whom were in retreat down the hill.

What the...

“Get up, get up, they’ll be back in a second!” the voice said, and Ron scrambled to his feet and looked up.

A girl was climbing quickly down one of the trees. She was about his age, brown-haired and wearing a red coat.

I’ve never seen her before.

“Who are you?” he asked as she dropped to the ground.

“That doesn’t matter now, come on!” she said, and dashed into the trees. Ron followed, trying to keep her coat in sight. His heart was pounding. Why did she help me?

Suddenly he realized he couldn’t see her anymore. He looked around wildly. Where’d she go?

“Over here!” her voice hissed. She was sitting on a low branch of one of the trees. “Come on, get up!”

“How?” Ron asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Jump and grab the branch, then walk your feet up the trunk.”

A bit awkwardly, Ron did as he was told, and was almost surprised to find himself straddling the branch, facing the girl.

She pulled off a knitted mitten and held out her hand. "Hermione."

"I'm Ron."

"Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too. Do you live in the village?"

She nodded. "We've just moved in."

"Who's we?"

"Me and my brother Drake – we're twins – and our mum and dad, and our aunt and uncle and cousins. What about you?"

"Ah-HA!" Fred shouted. Or possibly George. "There they are!"

"Brothers," Ron said in disgust, swinging his leg over the branch and dropping to the ground. "Lots of brothers. Come on."

Hermione followed him to the ground, and they ran, dodging Fred and George's snowballs. After a moment, they broke into the open area where the Weasleys played Quidditch in the summertime. Ron turned left to get back into the trees, Hermione following him closely. "Wait here," he panted when they reached cover, then turned around and ran back across the field, being sure to leave clear footprints in the snow.

Now, how did she say to do it again? Jump and grab, then walk your feet up the trunk, that's it.

He looked around. Those three trees that grew so close together were around here somewhere, he knew they were...

There. He ran heavily up to the first one and jumped for the lowest branch, just making it. His boots left snow on the trunk, but that couldn't be helped. Quickly, he stood up on the branch and climbed around the tree, up to a higher branch on the other side, and then (he

held his breath) between the trees – the branches flexed crazily, but they held his weight, and he was across.

He repeated the act to get to the third tree, then dropped as quietly as he could to the ground. He could see the twins, staring at the place where his trail stopped, near the base of the first tree – sooner or later they were going to figure out what he'd done, but it might give Hermione enough time to get –

Someone tapped his shoulder. He whipped around, managing to keep from yelling.

Draco sat up. "What was that?"

"I hit a tree with a snowball," Harry said.

"It sounded different." Draco got to his feet. "What tree was it?"

"That one right there," Harry said, pointing it out. "Want me to do it again?"

"Yeah."

Harry scooped, packed, and threw.

"It sounds hollow," Draco said. "Like a drum. Listen." He went to it and thumped it with his hand. "Hear it?"

Harry frowned. "Sort of."

Draco pulled his mitten off and ran his hand up and down the bark. "There's something here. It's like a catch or a lock or someth..." He trailed off. "It is a catch. And there's hinges on the other side. There's a door in this tree."

"A door in a tree?" Harry laughed. "Wonder where it goes?"

"I don't think it goes anywhere," Draco said, now with both his mittens off, hanging from his sleeves by their strings. "It's a little door.

Like someone keeps something here – ah!” He stepped back, and a section of the tree swung open.

“Wow.” Harry came around to Draco’s other side to look into the tree.

A red leather ball sat within. Draco picked it up. “I know what this is,” he said reverently.

“I know what it looks like,” Harry said guardedly. “But is it?”

“Where’d you go?” Hermione asked in a whisper.

Ron rolled his eyes. “I was trying to lead them off you!”

“Why?”

“Because – I don’t know – ” Ron racked his brain and came up with something. “Because we’re outnumbered.”

Hermione frowned. “We are not. It’s two to two.”

“All right, we’re outweighed then. They’re twice our size,” Ron said, pointing at Fred and George.

“That can be remedied.” Hermione cupped her hands around her mouth.

“Don’t,” Ron started, but he was too late.

“Owwoooo!” The howl rang through the orchard.

“What are you doing?” Ron hissed, slapping her hands away from her mouth.

“Calling for help,” Hermione said in an affronted voice, and repeated her cry. “Owwoooo!”

“Now they’re coming right at us!” Ron shouted, pointing at his brothers, who were doing exactly that.

Hermione flinched. “I hadn’t thought of that. Run!”

Draco let the ball go. Instead of falling at a normal speed to the ground, it sank slowly, as if the air were water. “It’s a Quaffle,” he said, picking it up and putting it back in its hidey-hole. “It has to be. And you know what that means.”

Harry nodded. “It means wizards live around here somewhere. Wizards who play Quidditch.”

“And most wizards who play Quidditch,” Draco finished, “are kids.”

The boys grinned at each other. Then they heard a sound. A howl.

“Neenie,” they said together, and started running as the howl was repeated.

Ron and Hermione broke into the open field again. “Split up – ” Ron gasped out. “Less of a target that way – ”

“Right.” Hermione split off from him and ran into the trees on the left. Ron went for the ones on the right, just barely making it out of the field before Fred and George ran into it.

Need to breathe. He hid behind a tree and sank to one knee, panting and watching the twins look at the footprints. Come on, follow me, he willed them. Follow me, not her –

A mittened hand covered his mouth. He froze.

“You with Hermione?” a voice said in his ear. “Brown-haired girl?”

He nodded.

“Then we’re with you,” the voice said, and the hand was taken away. Ron stood up and turned around.

Two boys about his own age stood there. One was dark-skinned and wearing glasses, the other was blond. "Harry Black," the dark boy continued, extending his hand. "I'm her cousin. This's her brother Drake."

Ron shook hands with both of them. "Ron, Ron Weasley – " He glanced over his shoulder. "Here they come." Fred and George had made up their minds, and were following his tracks.

Harry and Drake both grinned. "Not a problem," Drake said, and faster than anyone Ron had ever seen, snatched a handful of snow, packed it, and flung it accurately through the trees and into George's face. Harry's snowball hit Fred only a second later. Ron joined in with glee.

The twins were forced back into the open, and it only took a few moments of hard fire by the three younger boys before they broke and ran. "Yes!" Ron yelled, pumping a fist in the air.

"Your brothers?" Harry asked, leaning against a tree.

"Yeah. Fred and George. Twins, in case you can't tell."

"They pick on you a lot?" Drake asked.

"Sometimes."

"How come?"

"I guess just because I'm there, and younger, and all by myself." But I'm not all by myself. Not any more...

"How old are you?" Drake said.

"I'll be eight in March."

"We'll be eight in July," Harry said, grinning. "Drake and Neenie were born a couple days before me. Maybe we'll go to school together."

School.

Hogwarts.

Ron's happiness deflated like a pricked balloon.

They live in the village. They're Muggles. I can't stay friends with them. They won't understand.

"Probably not," he muttered, kicking at a clump of snow. "My family all goes to this boarding school up north. You've probably never even heard of it."

"What's its name?" Harry asked.

"You'll think it's stupid."

"We'll think what's stupid?" Hermione asked from behind him.

"The school his family goes to," Drake told her. "He says it's up north and we've never heard of it."

"His last name's Weasley," Harry added. "And we found a red ball hidden in one of the trees."

Ron looked at the other boy in shock. They found our Quaffle? Oh no.

"A red ball?" Hermione repeated, smiling. "How big of a red ball?"

"About so big." Drake measured with his hands. "And it fell slow when I dropped it."

Ron winced. We're gonna get in trouble, we should've hidden it better, Dad's gonna be so mad, Muggles aren't supposed to see enchanted stuff...

"Hmm," Hermione said. "Sounds like a Quaffle to me."

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I think it was a Quaffle. Ron?”

Ron stared at them. A wild hope began to grow inside him. “You know what a Quaffle is?”

“The ball Chasers play with in Quidditch,” Drake said promptly, with a small quantity of “well, duh” in his tone. “I want to be a Chaser when I go to Hogwarts. Harry wants to play Seeker.”

“You know Quidditch?” Ron blurted, his hope magnified a hundred times. “You’re going to Hogwarts?”

All three of them nodded.

“You’re – you’re wizards and witches?”

“Our whole family is,” Hermione said. “Our mums and dads, and us, and even Harry’s little sister Meghan. She’s four.”

“And a half,” Harry said. “Four and a half. Don’t ever forget the half.”

“Like she’d let us,” Drake groaned.

Ron barely heard them. It was all he could do to keep from jumping up and down screaming. A few, very basic thoughts kept chasing each other around in his brain: They’re magic. They’re my age.

And I think they want to be friends.

“Ron?”

He jumped. “Huh?”

“I said,” Hermione repeated, “do you want to come over to our house?”

“Er – I don’t know if I’m allowed,” Ron said truthfully. “Can I run home real fast and check?”

“Can we come with you?” Harry asked. “So we can see where you live.”

“Sure,” Ron said, grinning. They do want to be friends. They want to be friends with me. I’m going to have friends...

“AMBUSH!” two voices screamed, and snowballs pelted the four.

“Follow me!” Ron yelled, and took off through the trees into the field. He didn’t dare to look back, but he could hear the sounds of other people running with him, and only hoped that all three of them were staying with him.

“What now?” Harry panted out, coming up even with him.

“Split up,” Ron got out. “Two and two. Outflank them.”

“Got it.” Harry dropped back a pace to run beside Drake – Ron risked a glance over his shoulder to see it – and said something to him. Drake nodded, and Harry speeded back up to Ron’s pace. “Whenever you’re ready,” he said with a grin.

“Now,” Ron said as they passed into the trees. He turned left, Harry turned with him, and they found a semi-sheltered spot, where they both dropped to their knees and began packing snowballs. Drake and Hermione had disappeared; Ron fervently hoped they were getting ready as well. He watched Fred and George looking around cautiously from the other side of the field, then crossing it at a run, snowballs in hands.

Ron tensed, but Harry put a hand on his shoulder. “Wait till they get almost here,” he murmured. “More of a surprise that way.”

Ron nodded and readied his snowball. They were coming... they were closer... they were almost there...

“CHARGE!” Harry shouted, jumping up and catching the twins completely by surprise. As they turned to meet the threat of Harry and

Ron, Drake and Hermione leapt out of cover behind them and barraged them.

Attacked from two sides, the twins chose the better part of valor and ran for their lives. Ron yelled gleefully and gave chase, and his friends joined in gladly.

My friends. I have friends. I really and truly have friends.

I guess wishes do come true after all.

Fred slammed the door against a last volley of snowballs and turned to George.

“This,” he said, “changes everything.”

George nodded ruefully. “Our little brother is no longer an easy target.”

“And Ginny’s off limits.” The twins had established that long since. Their little sister was not eligible for pranks. She was just too... cute.

“So I guess we’re back to experimenting on ourselves,” George said.

Fred gave a short laugh. “Unless we can get his new friends to volunteer.”

“Maybe if we tell them it’s candy...”

Two pairs of identical brown eyes met. Speculation lurked in both of them.

An idea had been born.

Four windblown, exuberant children arrived triumphantly in the kitchen of the Burrow ten minutes later. Fred and George had vacated the premises already, so the friends had the room to themselves while they removed their layers of snow-encrusted clothing.

Two pairs of eyes, one brown, the other silver-gray, watched them from the stairs.

“The blond one is cute,” said the owner of the gray eyes dreamily.

“Are you crazy?” demanded the owner of the brown eyes. “The black one’s way cuter.”

“I like the blond one better,” the first girl insisted.

“You’re out of your mind,” declared the second girl firmly.

“One of them’s a girl, you know.”

“Which one?”

“The one with the long brown hair.”

“Oh. I thought you meant one of the boys was a girl.”

Both girls giggled.

“Come on, let’s go up to my room,” Ron was saying.

“We should ask your mother if it’s all right,” the blond boy said dubiously. “Do you know where she is?”

“She’s around, we’ll find her – ” Ron stopped at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at the two girls. “Hello, Ginny,” he said resignedly. “Hello, Luna. Everyone, this is my sister Ginny, and her friend Luna Lovegood. Ginny, Luna, this is Harry, Hermione, and Drake Black. They live down in the village.”

“Hi,” said the black boy, whom Ron had indicated as Harry.

“Hi,” Ginny said back.

Luna looked at him. "You're Harry like Harry Potter," she said. "You're the right age, too."

"Do I look like Harry Potter?" the boy demanded. "I hate my name. I wish my parents had named me anything else. Anything. But no, it was Harry, and then Harry Potter has to go and get all famous and then disappear, and now that's what everyone says. 'Oh, are you Harry Potter?' I'm sick of it."

Luna blinked, looking mildly startled by the vehemence of Harry's reaction.

"Sorry," Harry apologized, looking shamefaced. "It's just that I get it a lot."

"Excuse us, please," Ron said in a business-like manner, and started up the stairs between the girls. Hermione and Drake followed him, and Luna got to her feet and drifted up after them.

Ginny looked at Harry.

"You never actually said you weren't Harry Potter," she said.

"Well, I'm not. Happy now?"

"Yes. Very."

"Thank you." He started up the stairs.

"You crossed your fingers," Ginny said quietly as he passed her.

"What?"

"You crossed your fingers when you said it."

"I did not."

"Yes you did. I saw it."

“No, I did not. You saw wrong.”

Ginny shrugged. “If you say so.” She went up the stairs past Harry, heading for her own room.

I know what I saw. And I did not see wrong.

Cute or not, I don’t think I like him very much.
Ron is great, but I don’t like his sister much.

Oh well. I don’t have to be her friend.

Harry gladly abandoned thoughts of Ginny and paid attention to Ron, who was waxing rapturous over the Chudley Cannons.
What is it about boys? You get two or three of them together and within a minute they want to talk about Quidditch.

Hermione was bored.

Maybe I’ll go and see if I can find the girls. His sister and her friend.

She slipped out of Ron’s room. Harry and Ron were in the middle of a spirited discussion, with Draco listening to both sides, probably intending to mediate like he did when she and Harry fought. Draco hated people fighting.

They’ll never even notice I’m gone.

She descended two staircases before encountering someone. A female someone. But not Ron’s sister.

“Who are you?” demanded a plump, red-haired woman in an apron, staring at the strange little girl on her stairs. She could only be Ron’s mother.

“Hermione. Hermione Black. Are you Mrs. Weasley?”

“Yes, I am.”

“I’m pleased to meet you,” Hermione said, offering her hand. “My family’s just moved to the village – I have a twin brother Drake and a cousin Harry who’s our age. They’re up in Ron’s room. May I – ”

“Excuse me for one moment, dear.” Mrs. Weasley stepped to the foot of the flight of stairs Hermione had just descended. “RONALD WEASLEY! YOU GET DOWN HERE THIS INSTANT!”

Molly Weasley wasn’t often flabbergasted. But that was the only word that could possibly describe her emotions at this moment.

How could he do this. Bringing Muggle children into this house. We use magic everywhere, there’s no way they could possibly miss it, and they’ll have to be Obliviated, and if there’s one thing I hate, it’s using Memory Charms on children, it’s so easy to damage their minds permanently, and the younger they are, the worse it is...

Ron came thumping down the stairs, two other boys behind him, one of them blond – Hermione’s brother, most likely – the other one dark-skinned and bespectacled. “Hi, Mum,” he said in confusion. “These are my new friends – this is Harry – ” He indicated the dark boy. “And this is Drake, and that’s Hermione.”

“I know their names,” Molly said, stepping forward and pulling her son aside. “Ronald Weasley, how could you. How could you bring Muggles into this house. You know perfectly well you’re not to go making friends with Muggle children without your father’s or my permission – ”

“But Mum – ”

“Don’t you ‘But Mum’ me. Do you have any idea how much trouble you’ve caused? Do you have any idea – ”

“Mrs. Weasley?” said one of the other boys from behind her.

Molly turned to face him. “Yes?” she said politely. Being mad at Ron was no reason to shout at perfectly innocent children, who had no idea that their simply being in this house was criminal...

“May we use your fire?” the boy – Harry – asked.

“Our fire?” Why on earth would a Muggle child want to use the fire?
“Whatever for?”

“To call our parents and tell them where we are,” Drake said.

“My mum and my Aunt Carrie are witches, ma’am,” Hermione added quickly, “and my dad and my Uncle Pat are wizards. We’ve just moved here from Canada. We all live in the same house in the village.”

Good heavens.

Molly released Ron’s collar. “I’m so sorry, dear,” she said to him. “I spoke too soon. Forgive me?”

“S’alright, Mum,” Ron said with a smile. How wonderful. I haven’t seen him smile almost at all lately. “Come on, Harry, Drake, I’ll show you my comic books.”

“Of course you can use the fire, dear,” Molly said to Hermione – what a lovely name. Shakespearean, isn’t it? – as the boys disappeared upstairs. “I’d like to meet your parents, if they’re free. And your aunt and uncle, you said? You share a house with them?”

The girl nodded. “Uncle Pat is my dad’s twin,” she said, following Molly down the stairs. “And Mum and Aunt Carrie were best friends at school. So when they all got married, they wanted to stay together, and then they had us, and they had to stay together so we could be friends.”

Molly laughed. She liked this girl, with her excellent manners and her matter-of-fact speech. Perhaps I can become friends with her mother or her aunt. Or both. If she is anything like the women who raised her, I should enjoy their company quite a lot...

“Where are you?” Sirius demanded.

“At the Weasleys’ house. It’s called the Burrow. Ron Weasley is just our age and Ginny is only a year younger. We’re friends with Ron already. And Mrs. Weasley says we can stay for lunch. Can we, please, Uncle Pat?”

“Well, if she says you may, you may, Hermione. Tell the boys to behave themselves, and be home by two o’clock.”

“We will. Bye.” With a whoosh, Hermione’s head vanished from the fireplace. The green flames that had been there sputtered and went out.

I can’t decide if this is good or bad. The cubs making a friend is definitely good. But that friend belongs to a magical family, who might recognize any one of us for who we are, and that would definitely be bad.

Ah, dammit, I’m not a deep thinker. I’ll go with good and leave it at that.

Someone was laughing. Sirius turned around and saw Remus leaning on the doorframe, chuckling. “What?”

“Just thinking. You sound so... fatherly, Padfoot. If anyone had told us about this ten years ago, you know we wouldn’t have believed it.”

“Well, we wouldn’t have believed parts of it. Like you getting married, Moony, or us raising Prongs’ son.”

“Or Lucius Malfoy’s son.”

“True. That we would never have believed.”

“And yet, here we are.” Remus spread his hands wide. “And I honestly can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be.”

“If James and Lily hadn’t died,” Sirius said quietly.

“There is that. But that might mean we’d still have Voldemort to contend with.”

“Good point.”

Remus leaned his elbows on the windowsill. “All things considered, this really may be the best of all possible worlds...”

“If you’re going to get philosophical, I’m leaving.”

“If you’re leaving, may I suggest the kitchen as a possible destination,” said Aletha from the doorway. “Considering lunch is ready.”

“The cubs just called, they won’t be home for it,” Sirius said, standing up. “They’re eating at the Weasleys’ house. They’ve made friends with a couple of the children.”

“That was quick.” Aletha preceded the men out of the room.

“From what I could gather, they found the youngest boy, who’s their age, being teased by his older brothers and took his side.”

“Like us and Peter?” Remus said lightly. “That is how we met him, if I recall correctly.”

Sirius winced. “Well, yes. But I hope this friendship won’t end up like that one did.”

“Since Voldemort’s gone, I find it highly unlikely,” Aletha said thankfully.

“It’s always possible he could come back,” Remus pointed out. “No one ever found a body. He just hasn’t been seen since that night.”

“Must we discuss horrible things on such a nice day?” Aletha asked.

“Better than discussing them on a horrible day. Then they’d only make us feel worse. Now, when we feel horrible after discussing horrible things, we have the niceness of the day to cheer us up.”

Aletha shook her head as they arrived in the kitchen. “Danger, do me a favor,” she said. “Shut this ravaging maniac up.”

“Gladly.” “Speak, cousin, or if thou canst not, stop his mouth with a kiss and let not him speak neither.”

And a nicer way of being shut up I’ve yet to encounter...

(A/N: Well, since everyone was so very eager for this chapter – even me, I’ve been planning the scene in the orchard for a month – I went ahead and wrote the darn thing, and here it is! I expect lots and lots of reviews, since everyone wanted it so much! Special mention to the first person to spot the lines “borrowed” from the PoA movie, and the first to tell me the source of Danger’s quote at the end of the chapter!

I need input, people. What are your feelings about revision? Should I go back and fix things I messed up the first time through, or should I leave the story as it is? (No plot changes – I’m talking little bits of dialogue.) Please tell me what you think!

Note to everyone: Probable story length is holding steady at 45 chapters. Sequel length is unknown... but since it will cover all seven years at Hogwarts in some detail (not as much as canon, obviously, but quite a bit), probably pretty darn long!

Love to everyone, and hope you liked it!)

Chapter 34: Make New Friends

“Does my hair look all right?”

“Yes, your hair looks fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. Are my robes on crooked?”

“No, they’re perfect.”

“They look like they’re too long on this side...”

“Letha, will you please settle down.”

“You’re not helping any, Gertrude.”

“That was mean. Why are we so nervous anyway?”

“Because Arthur Weasley has to have seen me at the Ministry at some point and might blow everything out of the water if my disguise isn’t good enough, because we never had to socialize with magical people at the old Den, and because we really want to be friendly with these people so our cubs can stay friends with their children?”

A pause. “That could be it.”

“Your robe’s on inside out.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it’s not. It’s the new fashion. It’s supposed to look inside out.”

“Does that include having the tag on the outside?”

A pause. “No. Would you mind turning around for a second?”

“Are you blushing?”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Just turn around.”

“Fine.”

Another pause.

“Better?”

Remus turned back around. “Yes. Much.” Sirius’ hair was rumpled, but he looked best that way. Kind of nonchalant. Whereas I am what my mother used to call a nerd, and therefore look best when immaculately groomed.

You are not a nerd. You’re a gentleman.

Oh, and Sirius isn’t?

Do I have to answer that? Come on, it’s almost 3:50.
Patrick and Carina Black

And John and Gertrude Black

Request the favor of the company of

Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Weasley

And Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Lovegood

At their home, the Marauders’ Den

On the sixteenth day of January

At the hour of four in the afternoon

For tea and refreshments

Children welcome

“The Marauders’ Den,” Arthur Weasley commented, reading over the invitation one final time. “I didn’t notice that before – what an interesting name for a house.”

“No more so than the Burrow, my love,” Molly said absently as she finished combing Ginny’s hair. “Ron, go wash your face, you’ve still got something on your nose.”

“But I washed already, three times,” Ron protested.

“Then make it four. Go.”

Ron rolled his eyes when he thought his mother wasn’t looking and ducked out of the room. “And don’t even try just running water in the basin!” Molly called after him.

“Come along, Weasleys, it’s almost four and we’re expected for tea,” Arthur said happily as Fred and George arrived in the doorway. He pulled his wife aside as the children went down the stairs to wait in the kitchen. “Molly, dear, are you sure it’s wise to bring all of them? The twins are a bit older than any of the Blacks’ children...”

“Do you want to leave them home alone, Arthur?” Molly asked tartly.

Arthur blanched. “Er, now that you bring that up, it’s a fine idea to take them along, just fine.”

Ron returned from the bathroom, his face a bit pink from scrubbing. “Oh, that’s much better,” Molly said approvingly, and kissed him on the forehead. “Go on down, Ronnie, we’ll be there in a minute...”

“Mum, please,” Ron begged. “Don’t call me Ronnie in front of Harry and Drake.”

“Should we call you our Ickle Ronniekins, then?” Arthur asked, teasingly. “I’m only joking, son,” he added hastily to erase the look of horror on Ron’s face. “Don’t you worry. We’ll all be on our best behavior today. New friends deserve the best we have.”

“When’re they gonna get here?” Meghan asked, squirming in her chair.

“Be patient, Pearl,” Sirius said, stroking his daughter’s cheek. “They’ll be here soon enough.”

“You always say that,” Harry complained. “It’s always ‘soon enough’ or ‘in a little while’ or something. It’s never ‘right now’.”

The fireplace chimed. “Yes it is,” Draco said from across the room.

Harry made a face at him.

“You’re biting your lip again,” Danger murmured to Remus.

“Thanks.” Remus schooled his face to calm and welcome as a spinning form appeared in the green flames – a red-haired woman, small and plump, with a highly motherly air. This must be Mrs. Weasley, Molly, if Remus recalled Dumbledore’s letter correctly. The four children who followed her out of the fireplace Remus had no trouble placing as the twins Fred and George, the cubs’ friend Ronald, and their semi-friend Ginny. The tall, thin man who finished the procession was obviously Molly’s husband, and it was to him that Sirius addressed himself.

“Patrick Black.”

“Arthur Weasley. Welcome to England.”

“Thank you. My wife, Carrie – my brother, John –” Remus extended his hand and found the other man’s dry and his grasp firm but polite. “And his wife, Gertrude, but only to strangers –”

“Everyone who knows me calls me Danger,” that lady interrupted with a smile.

“Then we certainly shall,” Arthur said. “My wife, Molly.”

The Pack shook hands with Molly Weasley, just as their fireplace chimed again. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley jumped.

“It’s all right,” Aletha said. “We’ve put a charm on the fire so it alerts us if someone’s connecting into it. This must be the Lovegoods.”

“What a good idea,” Arthur said in astonishment. “Why didn’t I ever think of that?”

The introductions were repeated with Gerald and Anita Lovegood and their daughter Luna, reminding the Weasleys that they hadn’t yet introduced their children. “Well, these are Fred and George, but heaven knows I can’t tell them apart,” Arthur said frankly, making everyone laugh. “And this is Ron, and Ginny, our only girl. We have three older boys as well, but they’re off at Hogwarts – you do know about Hogwarts, I trust?”

“Oh, yes,” Danger said. “Quite a lot. My teachers used to tell such stories about it – ”

“Mum?” Hermione said respectfully. “Please, may we be excused?”

“Oh, of course, forgive me, love. Children, your tea is upstairs, in the large bedroom – Black children, show our guests around, make sure they have what they need, and I don’t expect to see any of you again for a good hour at least, unless someone’s bleeding or unconscious.”

The adults laughed. Draco bowed to Remus and Danger, and Neenie curtsied. Harry and Meghan copied them with Sirius and Aletha. Then the cubs headed for the door, and the four Weasleys and Luna followed them.

“Your children are very polite,” said Gerald Lovegood, watching them go. “I should do a piece on them, what do you think, sweet?”

'Family in Existence with Obedient Children' – how would that look on the cover of the March issue?"

"Gerald edits The Quibbler," said Anita with a smile. "I do independent magical research."

"Really?" Aletha asked with interest. "What's your current project?"

"I'm working with a Healing Research team at St. Mungo's on a new formulation for the Blood-Replenishing Potion – something to cleanse the new blood as it's formed, to make sure poisoning or infection doesn't come back..."

"Do you mind sharing?" Aletha said, coming across the room to sit near Anita.

"Oh, not at all..."

"And they're off," Gerald said, casting an amused look at the two women, who had taken only a few sentences to get deep into the technicalities of potion-brewing. "I tell you, John, I love the woman dearly, but some of her interests... I mean, honestly, potions. It was my worst subject at Hogwarts..."

"I caused a few cauldron explosions myself," Remus said honestly. Some of his mishaps in the dungeons could still make Sirius roar with laughter when they were brought up. Such as the one that had turned the hair of everyone in the class a bright pink for three days.

Of course, he wouldn't have thought it was nearly so funny if we hadn't had Potions with the Slytherins.

"And yet, she dives right in. Give me something alive to work with any day."

"Are you interested in magical creatures?" Remus asked.

“Oh, very much so. It’s my dream,” the other man confided, “to be the man who finally validates the existence of something everyone else says doesn’t exist. Crumple-Horned Snorkacks, for instance – did you know there have been eighteen separate plausible sightings of them since 1975?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Now could that many people all be lying, all together, about exactly the same thing?”

“I don’t know,” Remus said politely. “I have an interest in the lesser Dark creatures myself. Redcaps, boggarts, that sort of thing.”

“Oh, boggarts. Nasty things. I have some stories back in my office about some persistent cases of boggart haunting – there’s a new theory that it was actually a boggart in the Hogsmeade Shrieking Shack, which would explain why it’s been silent for the last several years.”

“It seems as plausible a theory as any,” Remus agreed.

Danger snickered in his head. Liar.

Shut up, woman.

Make me.

“Excuse me,” Remus said to Gerald, and got up, crossing the room to where Danger was exchanging what sounded like candy recipes with Molly. “Pardon me, madam,” he said, sweeping a bow to Danger, “but your four o’clock medicine is overdue.”

What are you doing?

Play along. Please?

Oh, all right. “I’m sorry, Healer, I must have forgot to take it,” Danger said contritely.

“Well, we can fix that,” Remus said. He lifted her out of her chair and bent her backwards in a passionate kiss. Consider yourself shut up. Payback for the other day.

Right in front of everyone, too, Danger fumed. I’ll get you for this!

But she was kissing him back. Remus chuckled mentally. You can try, my dear, you can always try...

“You live as Muggles?” Arthur Weasley said to Sirius a bit later, clearly fascinated by the idea. “How do you manage taxes and records and such? Do you have Muggle jobs?”

“I’m a writer, so I work from home, and John’s found a job at one of the stores in the village,” Sirius said. “Carrie’s musical, so she was hoping to give piano and singing lessons. You wouldn’t happen to know if there’s anyone in the village who does that, would you?”

“I don’t think there is,” Arthur said, frowning in thought. “I believe the children can take lessons at the local school, but there’s always room for a private teacher, I’d think. And there is one woman who teaches woodwinds – flute and clarinet and so forth. Our Bill studied with her for a year or so, until he could continue on his own...”

Sirius tagged the information about the flute teacher for future reference.

“But do you send your children to the Muggle school?” Arthur asked.

“No, we teach them here at home. Now that they’re old enough to read, they do a lot of it themselves – not Meghan yet, of course, but it won’t be long. All we have to do is make sure we have the books around, and Hermione will read them, and then bully the boys into reading them too.”

Arthur laughed. “I wish my Ron had someone like your Hermione,” he said. “Molly’s hard put to keep him to his lessons some days – his head’s always somewhere else, up in the clouds on his broomstick, or on the chess board – he’s quite a player for his age.”

“How long has he been playing?”

“Four years, since he was old enough to tell the pieces where to go. He can beat me on occasion, and I don’t hold back, trust me – not since the time I decided I’d go easy on him and he checkmated me in ten moves.” Arthur smiled slightly. “Now it takes him twenty.”

Sirius chuckled. “The nightmare of every man – eclipsed by his own son.” He leaned forward. Arthur had brought up something he’d been wanting to ask about. “About lessons – would you, or Molly rather, consider taking our older three in with Ron for a while? We’d be willing to pay, of course, but you know better than we do what would prepare them properly for Hogwarts, and we want them to be ready, of course...”

“Oh, by all means,” Arthur said easily, waving his hand. “But we couldn’t possibly take your money. Your three are so good, Molly’ll never even know they’re there.”

Harry, Draco, and Hermione had reported on Mrs. Weasley’s reaction to finding what she thought were Muggles in her house – Sirius could only imagine her reaction to finding her schooling workload quadrupled without any kind of recompense. “Perhaps a trade of services. Music lessons for any of your children who’re interested, in return for regular lessons for ours.”

“That sounds agreeable,” Arthur said with a nod.

The men shook on it.

Upstairs, the beds had been pushed against the walls to make room for the large round table with places set for nine. The cubs had their own tea set, which kept the tea hot enough to be pleasant to drink but cool enough that it wouldn’t burn them, as well as pouring for them, on request, so they didn’t have to handle the hot pot. And Danger, knowing her cubs and suspecting the nature of the Weasleys, had provided several plates of small enjoyable things to eat.

“How come you have four beds in here?” one of the twins asked. Harry thought it was George, but he wasn’t sure.

“It’s our bedroom,” Hermione answered in her best “ask-a-stupid-question-get-a-stupid-answer” tone. She did it really well, Harry thought – and she should, from all the practice she gets using it on me and Draco.

The twins exchanged glances. “You all sleep in the same room?” the other twin asked.

“Why not?” Draco asked, taking another biscuit from the plate.

“Don’t you ever want to be alone?” Ron said in amazement.

Harry shrugged. “Sometimes. But there’s the guest room, and lots of rooms downstairs, and all outside to be alone in. Besides, we won’t have our own bedrooms at school – it’s all dorms, right?”

“Right,” answered the first twin, whom Harry was almost sure was George now. “But boys and girls get separate ones. Why don’t you put the boys in one room and the girls in another?”

“Because the guest bedroom isn’t big enough for two beds,” Hermione said. “Not with any floor space left over, anyway. And this room is big enough for four. And we like it this way.”

“What’s this?” Luna asked from over by the bookshelf before the silence got too uncomfortable, poking at something.

“Don’t touch that – ” Draco sprang up from the table. Harry rescued his cup of tea just in time. “It’s my recorder.”

“What’s a recorder?” Ginny asked.

“This is a recorder,” Draco said, holding it up. “You make music with it.”

“Can you play it?” asked Fred.

“A little.”

“Play for us,” Luna said. “Play something pretty.”

“Please?” Meghan said. She always loved it when Draco played.

Draco smiled a little shyly. “All right.” He put the pipe to his lips.

Do-re-mi-sol-mi-re-do, mi-sol-la, do-ti-sol-mi, fa-mi-re...

It was a sweet, wandering melody that Harry had never heard him play before. He wondered where Draco had heard it, or if he was making it up. Whichever, it had his audience enthralled. Luna had her eyes half-closed and her head tilted to the side. Ginny was leaning forward in her chair, her eyes following every move of Draco’s fingers on the pipe. Ron didn’t even seem to notice that he had crushed the piece of gingerbread he’d been holding and was now raining crumbs on his robes.

...re-do-ti-do, Draco ended.

“Where did you learn that?” Hermione whispered.

“I thought it up. From one of the books we read. The one about the thief and the dwarves and the dragon.”

“Wicked,” Fred said in tones of admiration. “Bill can play the clarinet, but it sounds kind of squawky a lot of the time.”

“And he doesn’t make stuff up,” George added. “That was brilliant.”

“Thanks.” Draco put his instrument back on the shelf, his cheeks now definitely pink.

He doesn’t take compliments well, Harry recalled Danger saying of Draco. “We can all play the piano,” he said to take some of the attention off his brother. “And we sing. My mum taught us how.”

“Your mum teaches people to sing?” Ginny said. “Would she teach me?”

George leaned around Ron and hissed something at Ginny. Whatever it was, it made her turn bright red. “Er, I mean, never mind. I’m sorry. I don’t want to learn.” She stared down at the table.

The cubs looked at each other and exchanged puzzled shrugs. Their business, Harry thought. Not ours. “Do you want to see some of the pictures of us in America? We were there for a while before we came here.”

“They’re Muggle pictures,” Meghan added. “They don’t move.”

“They don’t?” Ron said in tones of disbelief. “What do they do, just stand there?”

“We’ll show you,” Hermione said, and went to get the cubs’ personal photo album.

“How come you have just Muggle pictures?” asked one of the twins a while later (Harry had lost track of which one was which when they moved).

“We were traveling as Muggles,” Draco said. “To see what it was like. Have you ever ridden on a bus?”

“We rode the Knight Bus once,” said the other twin.

“American Muggle buses are a lot like that, except not so bumpy. And the seats are really cramped, not nice chairs like on the Knight Bus.”

“We rode on an airplane to get here,” Meghan chimed in. “I had to sleep all the way because I’m little, but Harry and Drake and Hermione got to stay up, and then they got in trouble for poking and hitting, and Mum made them go to sleep anyway.”

“No, that was on the way there,” Harry said without thinking, then froze. His hand went to his breastbone, as if the rings hanging against his chest could help him take the words back before anyone asked...

“On the way where?” Ron asked.

“Um... to the United States,” Harry said quickly. “We had to get there from Canada, where we used to live. And that was when we got in trouble for hitting. When we were going from Canada to the United States. That was when.”

Everyone was staring at him. I’m so dumb, I forgot about our story, I forgot we’re hiding, I’m so stupid, please don’t let me have messed everything up, please let them believe me...

“What’s this?” Ginny asked the room at large, pointing at one of the pictures. “It looks like someone carved faces in a mountain...”

“Mount Rushmore,” said Hermione quickly. “They’re American presidents. I forget which one is which, but they’re all really famous.”

Harry slumped in relief as everyone else gathered around the photo album again.

That was close. I’m so stupid sometimes.

They can be our friends, but they can’t be our Pack-friends. Not yet.

Not until we don’t need Pack-friends any more.
The visit lasted all afternoon.

Danger showed off her kitchen to Molly, receiving an invitation to come and see Molly’s in return, and recipes were traded for all kinds of delicious-sounding things.

Anita and Aletha made a date to go over Anita’s notes on the new potion formulation, as Aletha’d had some suggestions simply from what Anita could recall off the top of her head.

Gerald invited Remus over to his house to see his small menagerie, including a brothel of doxies and a pinch of pixies.

And Arthur Weasley was transported into upper realms of delight by Sirius' gift of a small, black-and-white television set, which had inhabited Sirius and Aletha's bedroom at the old Den, but hadn't found a home at the new one yet. "You must come over and see my car sometime," he told Sirius and Remus. "Do you know – don't tell Molly, of course – but I've actually got it to fly?"

"A flying car?" Sirius repeated. "This I have to see. I knew someone with a flying motorcycle once..."

Remus looked at him sharply. Must you?

Sirius continued talking with Arthur, but where Remus could see it, he held up his right hand, ring and little fingers stuck out, the other two held down by the thumb.

Inwardly, Remus snorted. "Keep your hair on" indeed. I'm not the one endangering us all.

Would you please relax?

No, I will not – have you heard what Sirius is doing over here?

Yes, I have, and I still think you ought to relax.

Why?

Because the odds of Arthur Weasley knowing that Sirius Black owned a flying motorcycle, or of him connecting it with us even if he does, are pretty damn low. However, most people can see tension in others, and wonder about it...

As usual, you have a point.

And also as usual, so do you. You can yell at Sirius after our guests go home.

Thank you, beneficent lady. You are too kind.

I know.

“Weasleys, time to go!” Molly’s voice called up the stairs. “Come along, children, where are you? Fred, George? Ron? Ginny?”

“Luna, you too!” Anita called. “Come on, it’s dinner time!”

There were no answers.

“They’re probably so deep in playing they can’t hear you,” Aletha said. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

She went quickly up the stairs and opened the door to the cubs’ room, smiling for a moment at the tableaux that presented themselves.

Harry and Ron were sitting side by side, with a large book open on their knees – knowing Harry, Aletha was willing to bet it had something to do with Quidditch – and were pointing things out to one another in the picture on the page, with Ginny sitting nearby, not quite an acknowledged part of the group, but not being shunned either. Hermione, Meghan, and Luna were having a tea party at the table with Hermione and Meghan’s dolls. And Fred, George, and Draco were in quiet, earnest conversation in a corner.

Probably discussing prank theory.

“Time for everyone who doesn’t live here to go home,” she said, and was gratified by the disappointed “Awww” that rose simultaneously from all four Weasley children. Luna looked considering for a moment, then rose matter-of-factly and folded the napkin which had been sitting on her lap.

“Thank you for a very nice time,” she said to Hermione and Meghan. “We must do it again soon.”

“See you tomorrow?” Harry said to Ron.

“We’re always up by nine. You can come right over...”

“After you get permission,” Aletha put in firmly, “from us and from Mrs. Weasley, yes, you may go visiting tomorrow. And on Monday, you three,” she said, including Hermione and Draco, “Mrs. Weasley is going to start teaching you lessons, to make sure you’ll know everything you need to when you go off to Hogwarts.”

She had said the magic word. The faces which had fallen at the mention of lessons brightened again at the reference to Hogwarts, and the cubs cheerfully escorted their new friends downstairs.

“Now, you four, I have a surprise for you,” Molly said. “How would you like to learn to play the piano?”

The twins quickly shook their heads, but Ron looked speculative, and Ginny blurted, “Mum, can I?”

“Yes. Mrs. Black – oh, dear, there are two of you, how are we going to handle this?”

“They can just call me Danger, like everyone else,” Danger said. “I doubt I’d even answer to Mrs. Black or Gertrude at this point.”

“All right, then. Mrs. Black,” Molly indicated Aletha, “is willing to give you lessons. Now, if you start, I expect you to keep on, do your work, and not give her any trouble. Is that understood?”

Ron and Ginny nodded. Ginny was grinning widely.

“Luna, would you like piano lessons?” Gerald asked his daughter.

“I would like that,” Luna said thoughtfully. “Drake plays nice music. Maybe we could learn to play together.”

Draco’s cheeks went pink, and he turned away.

“Oooh, Drake’s got a girlfriend,” Harry said, smirking.

“Harry,” said Sirius warningly.

“Sorry.”

The Pack stood still for a moment after their fire had returned to its normal color. Then, as if someone had flipped a switch, everyone relaxed at once and started talking, and then laughing at the coincidence.

“I think that went very well,” Remus said. “And now we have some friends in the neighborhood.”

“And not only grown-up friends, but friends for you four,” Sirius said to the cubs. “That’s more important.”

“So please, don’t fight with them,” said Aletha. “There’s nothing less fun than having to apologize to your friends.”

“But what if they’re the ones who were wrong?” asked Hermione the ever-practical.

“Apologize anyway,” Danger advised. “Saves time and makes them feel super guilty.”

Should I try that on Sirius?

Allow me to clarify... “Of course, it only works if your friends have a sense of guilt in the first place.”

Too bad.

“You’re talking about me,” Sirius said. “I can tell by the way you’re not looking at me.”

“Egocentric much, Padfoot?”

“Hey, it’s only the truth.”

“Speaking of the truth...” Remus made eye contact with Sirius and held it for a long moment. “We need to talk.”

“Now?”

“Now.”

“Kitchen?”

“That works.”

“Don’t tell me,” Sirius said when they were both sitting at the kitchen table. “The motorcycle story.”

Remus gave a firm nod. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t tell interesting stories about yourself, even if you do credit it to someone you knew once. We are trying to hide here.”

Sirius developed an interest in his shoes. “I know,” he mumbled. “I just really wish it was over.”

“So do we all,” Remus said feelingly.

“I was thinking the other day, Moony. Meghan’s literally never known a day when we weren’t hidden. We’ve been hiding now for five and a half years. That’s longer than her entire life.” Sirius tried a smile, but it didn’t work. “I’m just so sick of it all. Not the Pack,” he added quickly. “That’s one of the best things that’s ever happened to me. But having to hide. I guess I’m trying to get it over with. By doing really stupid things.” He chuckled without any real humor. “So, I’ll be more careful. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. And you have a point too, Padfoot. Liars tense up. So we have to be as relaxed as we can, so no one will realize our whole lives are basically a lie. I tensed, you didn’t. I was the one making the mistake today. So I’m sorry too.”

Sirius looked up from the table. “It’s fine.” He smiled again, more successfully. “Let’s go annoy the ladies.”

“It is what we do best.”

“So that other day when I was thinking, I didn’t just have one thought,” Sirius said as they returned to the living room.

“What, you had half of one?”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Very funny. But I was thinking about the cubs. Meghan, of course, she’s never known anything but Pack life. And Harry and Neenie were so little, they probably don’t remember life before the Pack.”

“I do too,” Hermione protested. “There was a house before the Den. It had blue curtains and a couch where Moony slept with me on him.”

“And the only reason you know that is because you’ve heard me tell it at den-night,” Danger said in an affectionate scolding tone.

“Harry?” Aletha asked. “Do you remember your aunt and uncle’s house?”

Harry shook his head.

“Probably just as well,” Remus said. “You weren’t happy there.”

“I know,” Harry said softly, his eyes on the carpet. Hermione hugged him, and Aletha went over and sat next to him. He climbed onto her lap and cuddled down, prompting the other three to go lap-hunting as well.

“Then there’s Draco...” Sirius looked down at the blond boy nestled against him. “How about it, little fox? You remember your other family?”

Draco shrugged. “A little bit, maybe,” he said. “Some from dreams. More from den-night stories.” He pressed his hand against his chest, where his mother’s ring hung on its chain. Harry, Neenie, and Meghan copied him. Remus had noticed the cubs doing this when

they were frustrated or bothered by something – it seemed to have become a habit.

“There you have it,” Sirius said. “Three no’s and a maybe. It’s official – this is all they know. Us. The Pack. We’re it.” He looked over at Remus. “Meet my motivation for doing better.”

“We’ve met,” Remus said with a small smile.

After all, they’re mine too.

(A/N: Can anyone identify the song Draco plays? It is a real song, and one you might know...

Special mentions to Aprilise for being the first to catch the PoA lines (only by dint of being the first to review – congrats to everyone who got it, you know who you are) and Suzybeth for being the first to get the quote from “Much Ado About Nothing”!

Question of the chapter: What’s your favorite LwD scene so far? Tell me yours, I’ll tell you mine!

FAQ’s: Once again, it’s answer time!

Will the cubs use their real names/appearances when they go to Hogwarts? Well, think about this – under what circumstances would they be able to use their real names and appearances? That is, what would have to happen first?

Will we ever see Wormtail? Yes. No further comment.

Will Remus and Danger have children? I refer to Chapter 12: “One of the side effects of lycanthropy was sterility.”

Will Harry and Ginny make up/become friends/fall in love? I think I need to start a club like S.P.E.W., but called I.D.U.P. – stands for “I Don’t Understand the Prophecies”. Let me know if you would be a member – if enough people need help, I might find a way to fic-ify the prophecies and explain what’s already been fulfilled, and what’s still to happen...

What kind of revisions? I'm not talking extensive time-taking stuff here – I just want to fix a couple little things. They will have no effect on when I update, and they won't change the plot any.

LOVE you all! Next chapter, "But Keep the Old", coming soon!)

Chapter 35: But Keep the Old

26 January 1988

Dear Aunt Andromeda,

I take up my quill on this, my seven-and-a-half birthday, to tell you that I am well and in good spirits. My guardians take excellent care of me, and I wear my mother's ring always.

I have made a new friend recently. We will be in the same year at Hogwarts. He is very good at playing chess and beats me a lot of the time. But I can play the piano much better than he can. Of course, he has only begun lessons and I have been playing for three years.

My guardians say that I may begin flute lessons when I turn eight. I look forward to this very much. I play the recorder now, which is like the flute because it is a wind instrument, but is very different from the flute in many other ways. I will have to work hard to get good at playing the flute.

Please give my best wishes to my Uncle Ted and my cousin Nymphadora.

Your nephew
30 January 1988

Dear Letha and everyone,

I was thrilled to get your letter. Glad you've found a place to settle down, and that the disguise I recommended for Harry is working. If you ever need a place to hide in a hurry, remember my door is always open. Not too much is happening on this side of the pond – the state of the Muggle economy makes work interesting, but then, doesn't it always...

Of Aletha's three new music students, one showed promise more as a pianist, another more as a singer, and the third... well, he was doing his best.

Luna always listened closely to the directions Aletha gave, even when she appeared to be paying attention to something else entirely. According to her mother, she practiced assiduously, sometimes for an hour or more. “This seems to be what my girl’s been looking for,” Anita said. “Something that gives both her mind and her imagination work to do. Bless you, Carrie.”

Ginny was less interested in piano than in voice, but Aletha stuck to her principles. “Piano comes first,” she said firmly one day in late winter. “You’ll always have use for it later. To help you learn tunes, to accompany yourself – and it’s one of the best ways to learn to read music. So keep working on piano, and you’ll be ready for voice soon.”

Ron was the least enthusiastic of the three, though he did his work and learned his music. “He has a good ear and a good sense of timing,” Aletha said in frustration. “And he sings perfectly well. His fingers just don’t seem to want to work together.”

“So maybe he’s not cut out to be a keyboard player,” Danger suggested. “Or woodwind, or strings. What else could he do?”

“He could be strictly vocal, but I’ve always felt that’s a mistake myself,” Aletha said. “Too limiting. You should have at least one instrument if you’re at all serious about music.”

“I’m not about music,” Sirius said, looking puzzled. Aletha reached across the table to flick him on the forehead with her fingers.

“What about percussion?” Remus suggested. “He could teach himself the basics of that, and I’m sure there are books on how to do some of the more complicated things.”

“That sounds about right for him, actually,” Aletha said with a laugh. “Ron is pure boy. Being allowed – encouraged, even – to bang on things would make him blissfully happy. I’ll have to suggest that to Molly.”

Ron woke up on March 1 excited. The twins and the Black boys had been dropping hints for three weeks about his birthday present. He knew that he would only get one present, a joint effort from his family

and his new friends, but that it was a large one. He knew that it was something he wanted. He knew that it was something that might sometimes annoy his mother. And he knew that it was something that had made his father put charms on his room so that noise could get in, but not out.

He had purposely not tried to put the pieces together. But he couldn't help wondering anyway...

That afternoon, after the song and his birthday cake, he found out.

"For me?" Ron stared, awestruck, as Fred and George pulled the sheet off a handsome drum set. He could tell it wasn't brand new – there were use marks on some of the drums, and one of the cymbals was ever so slightly dented – but it would work just fine.

Hermione handed him a wrapped box. He tore it open and found a pair of gleaming drumsticks, which he lifted reverently. The wood was smooth beneath his fingers, and he found himself imagining all the fascinating sounds he could make with these...

"This is so great," he said, unable to stop grinning. "This is my best birthday ever."

"We'll help you get them all upstairs after dinner," said Drake's dad. "They ought to just fit along the bottom of your bed."

And they did.

As soon as most of the snow had melted, the boys were out on their brooms every day that was even approaching fine. Hermione had generously offered Ginny the use of her broomstick on a more-or-less permanent basis, since Ginny was far more interested in flying than Hermione was.

Ron was astounded at the ease with which Ginny learned to fly. Hermione confided to Harry and Draco that Ginny had been "borrowing" her brothers' brooms all the previous fall when they weren't looking.

With the Weasleys, the Lovegoods, and both Black couples involved, it was discovered to be possible to permanently charm the orchard where the children practiced flying and played Quidditch. The Weasleys had never been able to use any real Quidditch balls other than their much-patched Quaffle, since the Golden Snitch and the Bludgers moved on their own, and there was the very real possibility of them escaping and respectively puzzling or terrifying the village. Now, however, a permanent Repelling Charm, such as real Quidditch pitches had, could be put in place.

Remus had bought Sirius a full set of Quidditch balls for his birthday, and Sirius had reciprocated a month later with a set of Beater's bats and a portable goal hoop set with attached automatic scorekeeper. Both men, at the time, had laughingly bewailed the fact that their Quidditch-playing days were behind them.

"So I guess I'll have to take them back, then," Remus said regretfully on Sirius' birthday, glancing at Harry, whose eyes were fixed on the Snitch.

"Nah, keep them around. We might find a use for them," Sirius said casually.

The same conversation, almost in the same words, was repeated on Remus' birthday.

Two days later, the Quidditch equipment, the cubs' brooms, and the cubs all turned up missing directly after breakfast.

Unconcerned firecalls to the Weasleys' and the Lovegoods' revealed that their children, too, had left early and without saying where they were going. "Just that they'd be home for lunch," Molly Weasley said. "And I've just had a look – their brooms are gone."

"Then I think we can guess where they are without much trouble," Danger said in satisfaction. "Thank you, Molly, I just wanted to be sure."

The disappearance became a regular morning occurrence, and the cubs invariably arrived home sweaty and exhilarated – some times

more than others, of course, depending on whose team had won. Hermione, Luna, and Meghan were the regular spectators of the group, leaving Fred, George, Ron, Ginny, Harry, and Draco to play. The only invariable rule about team formation was that the twins weren't allowed to be on the same side. Other than that, anything and everything went.

The rules the six played by also varied. Sometimes they would play the way they had before the Blacks moved in, using just the Quaffle, two Chasers and one Keeper to a side, and the match ended at a predetermined time. The matches were also timed in which they let one of the Bludgers loose and played with two Chasers and one Beater per team. Those could get messy, but no one ever got worse than a bloody nose or black eye.

Harry's favorite, though, were the games in which they got an adult to charm the Bludgers to act as Keepers, chasing players away from the goal hoops, and played with two Chasers and a Seeker on a team. He always played Seeker, and almost always won, though Draco occasionally gave him a run for his money, and Ginny was very put out about the time Harry had won against her by dint of having a longer reach.

Mornings were thus fully occupied for everyone, because Meghan and Luna were just as interested in watching as the boys and Ginny were in playing, and Neenie always had a book with her, so if she lost interest, no one minded. Afternoons were devoted to lessons and indoor play at one house or another. Molly Weasley found the Black children to be quite well along in all the things they would need to know for Hogwarts, except that Draco's reading comprehension was still a touch shaky and Harry needed some help with fractions.

"I can't tell you how much your children's friendship has meant to Ron," she said one May day over tea. "He tries harder now that he has peers to compare himself with – especially Hermione, my goodness, that girl is astonishing. So intelligent, and so willing to help him when he needs it – his writing's improved beyond all recognition, he actually understands what a paragraph is now, and heaven knows I'd tried to explain it to him so many times I lost count."

“She gets it from Danger’s side, I’m sure,” Sirius said. “John isn’t that smart.”

“Nor is he here to defend himself, I notice,” Danger said, smacking her Pack-brother lightly on the arm. “Say that to his face and see what happens.”

“Do I look suicidal?”

Remus was, at that moment, unpacking and shelving the latest arrivals at his workplace.

If it’s not one of us, it seems, it’s another. The first job that he had seen advertised for that he was both qualified for and interested in had been at the village’s bookstore, a small independent place instead of a branch of a chain. Exactly how independent it was became apparent within the next few seconds.

“Mrrraw?” said a voice from around Remus’ ankles.

“Hello, Aslan,” he said, placing the last book from his armload on the shelf and stooping to pet the store cat. A tawny creature with a sort of ruff around his face suggesting a mane and a tail that made Remus suspect kneazle in his ancestry somewhere, Aslan had earned his name honestly. He was listed on the store payroll as “Mr. Aslan F. Domesticus, Vermin Control” and received his pay every two weeks with the rest of the staff. The money which didn’t go for his food and upkeep went into a bank account to see him through his old age.

There are people who aren’t as well taken care of.

It was a common idea among those who studied Dark creatures that cats reacted badly to werewolves, because of their basically canine nature. Even some of the other werewolves Remus had met, by chance or while doing work for the Order of the Phoenix, had mentioned that their neighbor’s or their sister’s or their mother’s cat didn’t like them. But Remus had never noticed that about himself.

It might be just me, though. I've always liked cats. They may be able to tell.

He turned back to the cart, which now had two shelves full of books and one full of cat, and continued working.

Meghan turned five at the beginning of June, and Luna seven in the middle of it. The three oldest Weasley boys arrived home at the end of the month and were duly introduced to the Blacks. Bill and Charlie incorporated themselves into the Quidditch matches, making everything a great deal more exciting, since there were a lot more ways to play when the games were four on four. And Mrs. Weasley laid down the law to her third son.

"Percy Ignatius Weasley, for the last time, keep that dirty creature out of my kitchen!"

"Mum, Scabbers isn't dirty."

Molly went on as if she hadn't heard. "What would Mrs. Black or Danger think if they saw you toting that filthy thing about? That rat stays in its cage and in your room or it goes out of this house. Is that understood?"

Percy sighed. "Yes, Mum." He went up the stairs to his room and placed Scabbers in his cage. "Don't worry," he said to the rat through the bars. "We can still play in here. And I'll bring you some scraps from dinner."

The rat squeaked, exactly as if he'd understood, Percy thought with pride. Scabbers was a very smart rat. Percy sometimes read aloud to him, and the rat listened exactly as if he knew what the words meant... July was the month of birthdays in the Black house – two were celebrated on the 26th and one on the 31st, even though one of them wasn't really until two months later.

"You do realize, this may cause problems when it comes to Hogwarts time," Sirius said on the 25th, looking up from the illustrated Child's Guide to Potions he was wrapping.

“What do you mean?” Remus asked.

“Technically, you have to be at least eleven to go to Hogwarts. And Neenie won’t actually be eleven until after term starts the year Harry and Draco and Ron go.”

“That is true,” Aletha said. “The letter comes on your eleventh birthday, or a little earlier for Muggleborn students, so they don’t miss it in the excitement of the day, because they won’t be expecting it.” Her eyes flickered into “far-away” mode, probably recalling the day her letter had come, the day her life had changed forever...

“You said, technically,” Danger said to Sirius. “You think an exception could be made?”

“There’s no doubt she’d be able to handle the work, that’s for certain,” Remus said, smiling fondly. “Kitten can handle just about anything you give her.” It was his particular pet name for Hermione – she allowed no one else to call her that, not even Danger.

“And Dumbledore knows that,” Aletha said. “So I think he’ll be willing to let her come a year early.”

The Headmaster himself confirmed this when he arrived for the Pack-only party on the 28th, which was for all three cubs jointly. “If Hermione remains as mature and intelligent for her age as she is currently, I see no problem with letting her enter school along with her brothers and her friend,” he said, watching the cubs wrestle with Hagrid on the living room floor. “The problem, indeed, might lie in trying to keep her back a year – she might inflict damage on the one who suggested or tried to enforce such a thing.”

“Might, nothing,” Danger said. “She would hurt anyone who even suggested it.”

“So, we won’t suggest it, it won’t happen, everyone’s happy,” Sirius said, taking another grape from the bowl on the coffee table. “My question is, how are we planning to handle Hogwarts, period? Are they going to have to be out-of-den and disguised the entire time

they're there? That's an awful lot to ask of eleven-year-olds. Especially with the added strain of being away from us."

Dumbledore nodded gravely. "I have thought about that very thing, many times, as has Minerva."

"One solution I've considered is having you all move to Hogwarts, and having the cubs sleep in your rooms rather than in the dormitories," Minerva said from her seat across the room. "It would be irregular, certainly, but we've made arrangements for students with special needs before." She shot a look at Remus.

"The problem with that is that it would cause talk," Aletha said. "People would wonder, who are they, that they can live in the castle with their children? Why them and not me?"

"As I said, it is only one possibility I've considered," Minerva repeated.

"What we really need," Sirius said quietly, "is to find Wormtail and come out of this bloody lie we're living."

Danger nodded sadly. "I hate deceiving the Weasleys and the Lovegoods. Every day we lie to them is another day before they'll really be able to trust us once the truth comes out. And I don't want the cubs to lose the first real friends they've ever had."

"The cubs will be fine," Aletha said. "Their friends will think it's just wonderful that they're actually celebrities in disguise. What I worry about is the adults."

Remus smiled slightly. "Molly Weasley's face when she discovers she's been having Sirius Black and his wife over for tea ought to be a sight."

The rest of the company chuckled in agreement. The impromptu Quidditch league got another member in the last two weeks of August, when a friend of Charlie's came to stay. "Her name's Tonks," Ron said. "Well, that's her last name, but everyone

calls her by it because her first name's something long and funny that she hates..."

"Nymphadora," Draco said under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing, I just coughed."

"It sounded like you said something."

"I didn't."

Ron shrugged. "All right."

"Andy's daughter Dora?" Sirius repeated when Draco told him the news. "Well, it is a small world."

"Smaller for magical folk than for others," Danger said. "The girl's your second cousin, isn't she, Sirius, same as Draco?"

"Should be. I wonder if she knows anything?"

"Her mother surely wouldn't have told her," Aletha said. "Not a child that young. She can't be more than fifteen."

"And we trust eight-year-olds with our lives every day," Remus pointed out. "Be careful around her, cubs. Doubly careful."

15 August 1988

Dear Mum,

I saw the person who wrote you a letter in January today. He lives down in the village here; he's friends with Charlie's little brother. Instructions?

Dora

16 August 1988

Dearest Dora,

The same as ever. Do nothing, say nothing.

Mother

P.S. Does he still appear happy?

17 August 1988

Dear Mum,

Very happy. He plays Chaser when we play Quidditch, and he's really good. His cousin Harry plays Seeker. He's good too.

Dora

P.S. How's Dad?

18 August 1988

Dearest Dora,

Your father is fine. Is this Harry the same age as the person we were previously discussing? And does he also appear happy?

Mother

19 August 1988

Dear Mum,

Yes, and yes. Why?

Dora

P.S. You don't think...

20 August 1988

Dearest Dora,

Yes, I do think. Silence has just become doubly important. Lives may depend on it. So guard your tongue, my daughter. If you must tell the secret, tell it to only the person you told last time, and do it quietly. You were overheard previously.

Mother

P.S. And of course I know about that. Mothers know everything. In October, the Pack hosted a party – a Shakespeare party.

“We take parts and read the play aloud,” Danger explained to Molly and Arthur. “I’m sure you’ve heard of it or seen it somewhere.”

“My parents used to have reading parties,” Molly said musingly. “But I had no idea anyone did it anymore.”

“Maybe they don’t,” Danger said. “But we will. It should be fun – Patrick’s editing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for us, cutting down a few of the really long speeches and leaving in all the humor and the playfulness. Will you come?”

“Of course, we’d be delighted,” Arthur answered for them both.

“And, of course, the children are welcome. Fred and George can read if they want to, or play upstairs with the others.”

“They ought to read Puck,” Molly said with an affectionate grimace. “They certainly make enough trouble.”

Gerald and Anita were also intrigued by the idea, and the eight adults gathered in the Den’s living room on one brisk night in late October. The children had all retired to the cubs’ bedroom with large amounts of food and two decks of Exploding Snap cards.

“Our scene is Athens,” Sirius announced. “Enter Duke Theseus and his fiancée, Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons.”

“Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour draws on apace,” Arthur began.

A door closed quietly upstairs.

As Duke Theseus heard the case of Hermia, the rebellious daughter of Egeus, who wished to marry her love Lysander instead of her father's choice Demetrius, Danger noticed a small pair of feet appear on the stairs. By the time Hermia and Lysander had planned to run away to the forest, the feet had grown legs. And as Hermia's friend Helena, who loved Demetrius even though he scorned her, planned to win his gratitude by telling him of Hermia's flight, the legs developed a torso and head. A blond head.

Draco was listening, apparently utterly enrapt by the story.

The rude mechanicals, unlearned working men of Athens, planned the play they would put on for Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding, with many amusing slips of speech and turns of phrase.

Hermione joined Draco on the stairs.

"Our scene is now the forest outside Athens, where the fairies dance on nights like these," Sirius said. "Enter two fairies, one of whom is called Robin Goodfellow."

"Wait," Danger said, forestalling Gerald, who had been about to speak Puck's first line. "We have visitors." She beckoned for the children to come down.

"Do you three want to read?" Aletha asked Draco, Hermione, and Luna, who had been just out of Danger's view.

They all nodded.

"Drake, why don't you be Puck," Gerald said. "And Luna, you can be the other fairy, if that's all right with you, dear," he said to his wife, who had that part assigned to her.

"Oh, that's fine," Anita said, making room for her daughter beside her.

“And Kitten, why don’t you read Titania, the Fairy Queen?” Remus asked. If you don’t mind losing your main role, love.

Far be it from me to suppress a budding interest in Shakespeare for personal gain. Besides, there will be other nights.

“If we’re all ready, then, I think we can begin,” Sirius said. “Drake?”

“How now, fairy, whither wander you?” Drake read proudly.

“Over hill, over dale,

“Through bush, through briar,

“Over park, over pale,

“Through flood, through fire,

“I do wander everywhere,” Luna answered,

“Swifter than the moon’s sphere,

“And I serve the Fairy Queen,

“To dew her orbs upon the green.”

The Fairy Queen and her King Oberon wrangled over a changeling boy. A love charm was procured and applied inappropriately, tangling the lovers and making Titania fall in love with Bottom, one of the rude mechanicals, whom Puck had charmed to have an ass’s head. In the end, though, the true lovers found each other, everything came out all right, and the epilogue of the play fell to Draco to read.

“If we shadows have offended,

“Think but this and all is mended,

“That you have but slumbered here

“While these visions did appear...”

He’s good, Remus said.

“And this weak and idle theme,

“No more yielding but a dream.”

He is, and Neenie too, Danger answered.

“Gentles, do not reprehend.

“If you pardon, we will mend.”

Luna’s not half bad either.

“And, as I am an honest Puck,

“If we have unearned luck

“Now to scape the serpent’s tongue,

“We will make amends ere long.”

Of course, it helps that she took a fairly small part. Puck and Titania are big roles.

“Else the Puck a liar call.

“So, good night unto you all.

“Give me your hands, if we be friends,

“And Robin shall restore amends.”

Quite true.

They joined the rest of the adults in applauding Draco, who looked a little startled.

“You can’t ask for applause and then look shocked when you get it, Drake,” Remus teased. “Good work.”

“Yes, excellent, all three of you,” Molly said, looking around. “That was enjoyable – I admit I was a little shy about the idea at first, but it grew on me.”

“And it seems you’re not the only one,” Anita said. “Lumos!”

The beam of wand-light illuminated the stairs and reflected from six pairs of eyes.

“And how long have you all been there?” Sirius demanded mock-indignantly.

“A while,” Harry said defensively. “It’s a funny story.”

“You didn’t have to hide, you know,” Aletha said. “You could have come and listened.”

“Maybe next time,” said Danger. “I assume there will be a next time.”

“Oh, by all means,” Gerald said. “I can’t recall when I’ve enjoyed an evening more.”

“Tell us a story, Moony?” Hermione asked that night.

“Why me? Padfoot always tells you your bedtime stories.”

“That’s why,” Harry said. “We want a different one. Please?”

“Yeah, please?” Draco and Meghan echoed.

“Well, what kind of story did you have in mind?”

“Something with adventures,” Harry said.

“Something with a bad guy,” Draco contributed.

“Something with a family,” was Hermione’s request.

Meghan yawned. “Something about us,” she said sleepily.

Remus closed his eyes and thought for a moment, and then began.

“In ancient times there lived a great and evil wizard, so great that most feared even to speak his name...”

Playing with the language Sirius liked to use in his period stories, and with the events that had shaped his life and the lives of those he loved over the past years, Remus told the cubs a tale with everything they had asked for.

“For a time, they traveled, and came back to their homeland to settle anew. And there they lived, and thrived, and made friends, and were happy.” He noticed that most of his audience was asleep or nearly so. “And there we will leave them for tonight.”

He rose and gave each of the cubs a kiss and a scent-touch before leaving the room.

And they are happy.

I only hope they stay that way.

(A/N: Of course, as all good stories do, this one evolved over the years. ;-) ;-)

Congratulations to Spunky and Cat Calls, who correctly identified the song Draco plays as “Concerning Hobbits” from the LOTR movies!

ANNOUNCEMENT: I have a Yahoo group! Check my bio page! Ask me questions, speculate on where I’m going... I might even put up teasers and squash or confirm rumors!

Story length update: Sorry, did I say 45 chapters? I meant 50. :giggle:

Help needed: Can anyone tell me if the detail of Snape being Draco's godfather is canon or not? I've seen it in so many fics, but I don't seem to recall it from any of the books...

And a big thank you to everyone who's reviewed "Roman a Clef" so far! It will be updated, but no guarantees when!

So, please check out my Yahoo group, please review, and please keep reading! Next chapter: "One Is Silver"! Byes for now!)

Chapter 36: One Is Silver

The fire in the great fireplace in the Hogwarts kitchens flared green. One Headmaster and one house-elf waited in front of it, patiently and impatiently respectively.

“Master Draco!” Dobby cried as that child emerged from the fire. Draco quickly stepped to one side and braced himself for an enthusiastic house-elf hug. The rest of the Pack had arrived before Dobby let go.

“Dobby, I told you, I’m not your master now,” Draco said with a bit of embarrassment, since Harry and Neenie were obviously trying not to laugh at the sight of Dobby hugging Draco tightly around the waist.

“Dobby knows that, sir, but it makes Dobby feel good to call Master Draco his master. Dobby does not feel quite so...” Dobby glanced behind him at the other house-elves. “Out of place, then.”

“If he likes to call you that, let him, Draco,” Sirius advised with a chuckle, turning from greeting Dumbledore. “House-elves can be persistent little bu... er, things,” he amended hastily at Aletha’s warning look.

A house-elf passing by stopped dead in its tracks and stared at Sirius. “Sirius Black, sir?” it said in its squeaky voice.

The kitchen went completely quiet.

“None of you are to speak of this,” Dumbledore said into the silence. A chorus of voices assured him that they would not, oh, no sir, they would never speak of such a thing, not if Professor Dumbledore said not to, sir.

Sirius was still staring at the house-elf. Suddenly he snapped his fingers. “Got it. Kady.”

“Sir remembers Kady?” the elf squealed happily. She – name and voice seemed both to indicate a female – was beaming at Sirius.

“How could I forget you? You always brought me a bucket of water when I needed it the most.”

Kady beamed even more widely. Remus had a brief struggle to keep his face straight, which he lost. Within a few moments, he was howling with laughter.

“What in the world is so funny?” Danger asked.

When he says he needed it, he really means he needed it, Remus explained mentally, his voice being not overly useful at the moment. Him and James both. Haven’t I ever told you about seventh year?

Ah, the famous pre-N.E.W.T. drinking sprees?

Precisely. And Kady would occasionally have to apply the water herself, if they were too far gone to stick their heads in the bucket.

Now Danger was laughing too. Wonderful. Didn’t you have something to do with this?

No, I was their put-to-bed person, the nights they didn’t have to sober up quickly. The water was for the nights they did. Though I would occasionally come down here to watch them stagger around the kitchens singing off-key.

“If you’re quite finished...” Sirius said with dignity.

This, of course, only set Remus and Danger off again. Some time later, the Pack was ensconced by the fire, sipping tea (for the adults) or butterbeer (for the children and Sirius) and simply chatting.

“We don’t see you as much any more, now that we don’t have a legitimate excuse to come and visit like we did when Letha was Ministry Liaison,” Danger said. “Who have they put in, by the way?”

“Not that Umbridge woman, I hope,” Aletha said.

“No, the Ministry has simply eliminated the position,” Dumbledore said with a slight smile. “I am under the impression that Lars Vilias felt it a waste of time and money to have someone in that capacity, but was too kind to order you fired or demoted, Aletha, so that your disappearance actually saved him some trouble.”

“Always happy to help,” Aletha said with a smile. “So, are there any fun rumors about us?”

“Only the usual set – someone eventually did recall your romantic connection to Aletha, Sirius, but deemed it too unlikely that you would wait five years after escaping before kidnapping her.”

“And no one’s ever realized that Harry disappeared before Sirius escaped?” Remus asked.

“Only a very few. Even Severus Snape was unaware of the fact before I told him of it.”

Sirius sighed. “I’m still not happy with that,” he said. “I know it isn’t safe to try to erase the same memories twice, so we can’t Oblivate him, but I can’t help feeling it’s a mistake for him to know.”

“Severus Snape is trustworthy, Sirius, as much as I know you question the fact.”

“Trustworthy, yes,” Remus said. “Helpful, I doubt.”

The door of the kitchens swung open.

“Speak of the devil,” Danger murmured.

Snape, in all his black and billowing glory, strode into the kitchens, scattering house-elves left and right, making straight for Dumbledore.

“Yes, Severus?” Dumbledore said politely.

“Weasley and Tonks,” Snape ground out, granting the Pack only a cursory glance. “They seem to have decided to celebrate Valentine’s Day a week early. By decorating my office with red and white sequins. And then by releasing a niffler within.”

“And you are certain of the identity of the culprits?” Dumbledore asked as Sirius coughed and spluttered, his butterbeer having gone up his nose. Aletha handed him a napkin, her mouth twitching. Remus and Danger were studiously avoiding each other’s eyes, both sets of which were swirling with color. Hermione’s lips appeared to have disappeared in her struggle to keep from laughing, and the boys were both staring at the wall. Meghan had stuffed her sleeve in her mouth.

“Positive,” Snape said venomously. “They signed their work.” He handed Dumbledore a piece of parchment.

“From the red-haired dragon-mad twit and his color-changing sidekick,” Dumbledore read aloud. “This does seem quite convincing, Severus. But why bring it to me? Surely you are capable of handling the situation yourself?”

Snape scowled. “Minerva swears they did not do it,” he said pointedly, “and she has stated her intention of reversing any punishments I may give them.”

“I see,” Dumbledore said. “Well, Severus, I will look into it, and if these two students are guilty, you may punish them as you see fit. If, however, they are not, rest assured I will find out the true culprit and bring him – or her, or them – to you for proper chastisement.”

“Thank you, Headmaster.” Snape turned and stalked away. He was almost to the door when he stopped. Very slowly, he turned around and gave the group by the fire a hard, searching look.

The Pack waved to him, cheerily, nonchalantly, or cheekily, varying by temperament, age, and interest.

Snape’s face contorted, and without another word he swept out.

The Pack managed to wait until the door was closed behind him before bursting into laughter.

1 April, 1989, began quietly at the Den. Very quietly.

After all, if one was going to get in and out of Moony and Danger's bedroom without waking them, one needed to be quiet, Harry reflected. And he had to do it twice.

Draco and Meghan met him and Neenie in the hallway with their bags full of stuff. They traded and returned to the places they had come from, replacing what they had taken.

Then they returned to their own bedroom.

That was their big mistake.

Hermione, who was in the lead, screamed as a cascade of water drenched her the moment she stepped through the door. Harry stepped hastily back from the doorway, but he was too late. The charm had already taken effect on him, and a bucket appeared directly above him, tipping over, dumping its contents on him, and vanishing a moment later.

Harry bit back a yell. That's COLD!

Draco and Meghan stifled laughs. Harry glared at them, then grabbed Draco's arm and propelled him through the door, triggering the charm on him. "See how you like it," he said, shivering. The water hadn't got on the floor, he noticed, or on anything except them. It must be nice to be a grown-up.

Meghan smiled proudly. "I'm dry and you're not, I'm dry and you're not," she chanted, dancing out of Harry's reach. "I'm dry and you're not..."

Draco came back out of the room, dripping, and looked at Harry. They exchanged nods, and swiftly moved to box Meghan in. She shrieked as they cornered her and picked her up off the ground

between them. Neenie darted ahead of them into the bathroom, where she turned on the shower, full strength, with cold water.

Meghan kicked and screeched and tried to pull their hair, but the boys managed to dump her into the bathtub and hold her under the shower for a few moments.

“There. Now we’re all wet,” Neenie said, pushing her hair out of her face.

“And loud, too,” Moony said from the doorway as a spluttering Meghan turned the water off. “Happy April Fools, cubs.”

“Fool, fool, April fool, you learn naught by going to school,” they chanted with him.

“Get changed and dry and come down to breakfast,” Danger said from behind him. “It should be ready in about half an hour.”

The cubs nodded solemnly, exactly as if they didn’t know there would be a slight delay.

Brushing her teeth, Danger sensed bemusement in the bedroom. What’s wrong?

These are not my pants.

They’re not?

No. They’re... well, you look.

Danger turned around. No, those aren’t yours, she agreed, observing the size of the garments Remus was holding up for her inspection. But they do look familiar. Do you think...

“’ Scuse me, but do these belong to you?” Sirius’ voice said from the direction of the door. A ball of fabric landed in Remus’ arms. “They certainly don’t fit me. And I’ll take the ones you’re holding, if you don’t mind.”

Danger sighed. I think I see.

I know I see. "You'd better check for everything else while you're at it," Remus said dryly. "It's probably all been exchanged."

"All of it?"

"So that's what they were doing up so early," Aletha's voice said. "Danger, may I look?"

"Go ahead, it's nothing you haven't seen before." Aletha usually did the family laundry, although everyone helped out from time to time, as eight people made a lot of dirty clothes.

"Yes, these are mine," Aletha said as she slid drawers open and shut. "They did a good job, kept everything all nicely folded – tell you what, why don't we just switch bedrooms for the morning. Then we can replace everything after we eat."

That same day, the Weasley twins decided that, since it was their last spring at home, they should make it memorable, and declared open season on small people, prank-wise.

Unfortunately for them, they had no idea who they were dealing with. After two or three rounds of pranking back and forth, the cubs got Moony and Padfoot to help them plan a master prank, and the twins admitted defeat.

As George said, "Pink is not a good look for us."

The spring and summer, after that, were mostly peaceful.

The woman stood among the trees, cloaked in black although the day was warm. From the clearing ahead, she could hear music. Slowly, carefully, she moved closer, until she could see the people in the clearing, but they could not see her.

The musicians sat on one side of the clearing – a blond boy with a pipe and a red-haired one with a small hand drum. The melody and rhythm they played combined to give the scene an unreal feeling, as if she had been transported thousands of years into the past. The

other children present, three or four of them, were all looking in one direction, and as she turned to look that way as well, her feeling of displacement intensified.

The child wore a white dress which left her arms entirely bare and showed her legs to the knee. She was slender and small, dark-skinned and dark-haired, barefoot and bareheaded, and she was dancing. She looked like the spirit of the summer come to life, light-footed and free, unconstrained by such rude things as gravity or time. Each movement seemed to tell a story, if only the watcher knew how to interpret them. Her leaps and twirls seemed to last forever.

She was beautiful.

The ethereal melody wound to a close. The girl sank to her knees, breathing hard, as her audience applauded her.

The woman slipped back into the trees and Disappeared carefully, making only the faintest of noises. No one would ever need to know that she had come. She had seen what she needed to.

He was happy and had friends. That was all she needed to know. For Harry's birthday, at his request, the entire Pack went up to London and spent the day at the Zoo. "Take you to the monkey house and let you have a family reunion, Padfoot," Moony teased.

"And then we can go by the wolf exhibit for yours," Padfoot retorted.

Harry, of course, wanted to spend some time by himself in the reptile house, and after giving him strict instructions on when and where to meet them, the Pack allowed it.

Harry leaned against the railing and looked in at the largest snake. It was a Brazilian boa constrictor, and it seemed to be fast asleep. He wasn't surprised. After all, what else was there for it to do?

"What do you do for fun?" he asked softly, not expecting an answer.

“Look at the humans and see which of them appear toothsome,” one came anyway. The snake raised its head. “That’s interesting. A human who speaks my language?”

Harry shrugged. “Does that bother you?”

“Of course not. It’s been a long time since I’ve had a decent conversation with anyone. My name is Hassisasseth. What’s yours?”

“Harry. Can I call you Seth?”

“Why not. So, Harry, what do you do for fun?”

“I play with my friends and siblings.”

“You have nest-mates?” This was the literal translation of the Parseltongue word for siblings. “How lucky for you. All mine are gone. I ate some of them, and the rest are probably long dead.”

Harry did not shiver at the snake’s casual mention of eating his own brothers and sisters. It had bothered him a lot when he first began to talk to snakes, but his Pack-parents had helped him understand. Snakes weren’t humans, so they did things humans wouldn’t do. Just like humans did things snakes wouldn’t do. No snake had ever beaten a child, or locked one up. “I’m sorry.”

“It is the way of life. Ahhhhh...”

It was a long-drawn-out exhalation of pleasure. “What?”

“How I would love to get my coils around that...” Seth said with longing in his voice.

“Around what?” Harry asked.

“Behind you, silly human eggling.”

Harry turned. A rather large boy about Harry's own age had just come into the reptile house, following a woman with two or three other boys in tow. He had blond hair and a fat, pouty face, and he made Harry feel odd. As if he should know this boy, but didn't...

"They do not feed me nearly enough," Seth said. "Would he not make a glorious meal? A bulge two months in digesting..."

Harry's imagination provided a vivid picture of the boy inside Seth, and before he could stop himself, he laughed aloud.

The sound rang and echoed in the quiet cool of the reptile house. Everyone turned to see what it was.

The boy looked at Harry with distaste. "Are you laughing at me?" he demanded.

Harry shook his head.

"You are too," the boy said angrily, starting to advance on Harry. "I don't like it when people laugh at me. What's so funny about me, then? You want to share? You want to? Huh?"

Harry took a step back and found himself against the rail already.

"I'll teach you to laugh at me," the boy snarled, and swung his fist back.

Harry ducked.

The boy's fist passed over Harry's head and into the glass of Seth's exhibit.

Or it would have, if the glass had still been there.

Carried away by the force of his swing, the boy toppled over the railing and into Seth's small pond with a splash.

“Did you do that?” Seth inquired, appearing beside Harry, wrapped around the bottom supports of the railing. “Thanks.”

“Er, well, I didn’t mean to,” Harry said unhappily. “And I really shouldn’t have. I’ll see you around, Seth, good luck...”

Quickly, he straightened up and raced out of the reptile house before anyone could connect him with the yelping, spluttering, soaked boy in the boa constrictor exhibit.

“I’m in trouble,” he panted out to Padfoot, who was the first Pack-parent he found, holding Meghan up to look at the parrots. “There was a boy – and the glass – I didn’t mean to – ”

“Hold on,” Padfoot said, lowering Meghan to the ground. “Catch your breath. Is anyone hurt or dead?”

“No.”

“Did you do anything visible?”

“I made the glass on one of the snake exhibits disappear.”

“Why?”

Harry explained about the boy and Seth, and what had happened.

“Accidental magic,” Padfoot said in a tone of certainty. “And the boy’s not hurt?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then our best bet is to change your appearance ever so slightly, so they can’t find you if anyone did see you. Hold still.” Padfoot looked around him, then pulled out his wand and changed Harry’s red shirt to a blue one, and his black pants to tan. He also pointed the wand at Harry’s head, and Harry felt the soft-breeze-touch of a glamour charm pass by him.

“What was that?”

“Blond tips on your hair,” Padfoot said, conjuring a mirror so Harry could see himself. “You like it?”

“Can I keep it?” Harry asked, admiring himself.

“If you want to. Consider it a birthday present. Come on, let’s go find everyone else. Birthday boys deserve ice cream.”

Soon after Bill, Charlie, Percy, and the twins left for Hogwarts, a new subject was introduced into the cubs’ curriculum.

Dancing.

Partner dancing.

The response from everyone was the same:

“We have to dance with boys?” squealed the girls.

“We have to dance with girls?” yelled the boys.

“And, of course, it doesn’t matter that they play together every day anyway,” Aletha said with a sigh one evening.

“Well, they often play with everyone,” Danger said. “But then sometimes Harry and Ron go off together – well, all right, a lot of times Harry and Ron go off together, usually because Draco wants to stay home and do his music. And then he plays with Luna, since she’s the most musically interested of the others. And Ginny will sometimes play with Neenie and Meghan, but often they don’t want to play what she does, and she’d love to play with Harry and Ron, and sometimes they let her, but sometimes she’s the dreaded girl and they don’t...”

“In other words, it’s hopelessly mixed up and it changes every day,” Sirius said.

“Right. They’re all friends, but who’s close with whom and who will play with whom changes sometimes every hour – sometimes every minute.”

“Fine, then,” Remus said. “Declare brother-sister dancing. Have Harry dance with Neenie and Ron with Ginny.”

“What about Luna? She doesn’t have a brother.”

“She also doesn’t have any qualms about holding hands with Draco. And I think he’ll be a good sport about partnering her for the sake of learning.”

And so it was done. Sirius taught the cubs the steps of the set dances that all moneyed purebloods learned, with Danger as his partner and Aletha providing the music. There was little trouble with these, mostly because the only touching involved was holding hands or pressing palms together.

Remus had the really hard job, which was teaching the cubs basic ballroom steps. He managed surprisingly well – the hardest part was getting them to stay in the correct positions relative to each other.

But the real test came one day in October, when Remus took full advantage of an opportunity.

“Luna’s sick today and can’t come, so Draco has to dance with Meghan,” Moony announced. “Now, this isn’t fair to him. She’s a good dancer, but they’ve never danced together before. So I want to make it fair to everyone. Switch partners.”

“What?” Ron said in astonishment. “You want me to dance with her?” He pointed at Hermione.

“I guarantee she doesn’t have anything catching,” Moony said dryly. “Go ahead, you can touch her.”

“I don’t want to touch him,” Hermione protested. “He’s gross.”

“I am not gross!”

“Who came home all muddy the other day?”

“I fell in the mud!”

“Oh, right. You fell in the mud. And then you rolled around in it for a while.”

Ginny looked over at Harry and shrugged as Ron and Hermione continued to snap back and forth. Harry made a decision. “My lady,” he said loudly, bowing to Ginny and cutting off the incipient argument. “Will you favor me with this dance?”

Draco took his cue and bowed to Meghan, who curtsied at the same moment as Ginny. Aletha began to play, a slow waltz, and the two couples set themselves and began to move to the music. Harry was careful not to step on Ginny’s toes, and Ginny seemed to be taking the same care. At least, she was looking at the floor an awful lot.

Ron and Hermione glared at each other for one more moment, then grudgingly took the waltz position and began to dance. After a moment, Hermione gasped, and Ron blushed and muttered an apology.

“No, it’s my fault,” Hermione said, blushing a bit herself. “My foot was in the wrong place. Try again?”

Ron smiled a little. “All right.”

Unseen by the cubs, Remus and Danger exchanged smug looks.

My lady, will you favor me with this dance?

Stealing lines from your own Pack-son, man? Have you no shame?

No. None at all. You should know that.

Oh, and I do, I do...

And then there were four couples waltzing in the Blacks’ living room.

The Weasleys hosted that year's Christmas party for all three families. Sirius was returning from a trip to the punch bowl when he saw something unusual. And familiar.

An old, tattered piece of parchment, which he had last seen in the hands of Argus Filch...

"Moony," he said quietly. "Look what the twins have."

"Is that..."

"Sure looks like it."

Remus grinned. "Should we give them a hand with it?"

"Why not."

Casually, the two men moved to flank the twins, who were tapping the surface of the parchment with their wands and muttering things.

"What've you got there?" Remus asked.

George jumped. "Nothing," he said hastily, trying to hide the parchment under a pillow on the couch.

"Doesn't look like nothing," Sirius said, pulling out his own wand. "Accio Parchment!"

The twins winced as the parchment soared into Sirius' hand. "It's just an old bit of parchment," Fred said too earnestly. "Nothing to get excited over."

"Oh, really now," Remus said. He drew his wand. "Reveal your secrets," he said, touching his wand to the parchment.

Make me, the Map printed. Sirius and Remus grinned at each other.

“That’s all it’ll do for us either,” George said, sounding frustrated. “We know it must be something good – we nicked it off Filch – but we can’t figure out what.”

“Why don’t you try asking?” Sirius suggested.

“Asking?”

“Yes. Ask the – parchment – what it is.”

The twins looked at each other. “Can’t hurt,” Fred said, and touched his wand to the center of the square, which Sirius handed back to him. “What are you?”

I am the Marauders’ Map, an Aid to Magical Mischief-Makers.

“Wicked,” the twins said together, grinning.

“Map of what?” George asked.

Hogwarts and its grounds, along with all the people therein.

“All the people?”

All the people. Where they are, who they are, all the time.

Fred took a deep breath, nerving himself up for the big question. “How can we work you?”

You must solemnly swear that you are up to no good.

“Erm, all right,” George said in a bemused tone, his wand still touching the map. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

Remus and Sirius decided this would be a good moment to withdraw, while the twins were distracted by the Map.

“Worthy successors to our tradition, Mr. Moony,” Sirius said in tones of satisfaction.

“Worthy successors indeed, Mr. Padfoot. But we’re going to have to cut out the nicknames from now on. They might hear us.”

Sirius winced. “Hadn’t thought of that. Damn Wormtail anyway.”

Several stories up, if Sirius had only known it, the object of his curse slept soundly in his cage.

(A/N: WOW! I had no idea so many of you either were or knew Girl Scouts! For those of you who don’t know what I’m talking about, it’s a Girl Scout camp song:

“Make new friends

“But keep the old;

“One is silver

“And the other’s gold.”

And no, it wasn’t Charlie and Tonks who tore up Snape’s office. It was a couple of Slytherins trying to frame them. And I will eventually do a one-shot of the twins vs. cubs prank war, so keep your eyes open for it!

As so many of you so ably guessed, the next chapter is “And the Other’s Gold” – and fair warning, it will have a NASTY cliffy ending. :giggles in glee: See you all then!)

Chapter 37: And the Other's Gold

Draco lay in the sun and hummed to himself.

Happy half-birthday to me,

Happy half-birthday to me...

"Sun worshiper," Letha said teasingly from behind him.

Draco rolled over lazily, since his back was warm enough and his stomach was cool, and smiled at his Pack-mother, upside down as everything was at the moment. "There isn't much in January. I have to get it while I can."

"You be careful. Even if there isn't much sun, you burn quicker than anyone I know."

Draco made a face. "It's because I'm so pale. Why couldn't I be darker, like Harry or Neenie, or really dark like you or Meghan?"

"No, it must be something other than just your being pale," Letha said thoughtfully, "because Moony's almost as pale as you are, and I've never seen him with a sunburn."

"Is someone taking my name in vain?" Moony asked from somewhere nearby.

"Just commenting on how you don't get sunburned."

Moony walked into Draco's frame of vision. "That's because, unlike some people, I'm intelligent enough to remember to wear sunblock. You really need not to coddle him this summer, Letha. Even if he does say that your massages make his back feel better."

"Oh, but I can't stand to see my loving husband in pain," Letha said in a sappy-devoted tone. "And if something my poor skills can do will ease his anguish, who am I to withhold it?"

“What a proper wifely attitude,” Padfoot’s voice said unexpectedly, and Letha squeaked.

Draco didn’t bother to look. He had no desire to watch people kissing.

Why do they do that anyway? It must be fun somehow. Maybe I’ll find out someday.

He thought about that for a moment, then shook his head. Nah. Not interested.

27 March, 1990

Vernon –

Enclosed find the money you requested and my new address. Yes, another one, and you needn’t make a fuss, because it’s the best I could do. I am as well as can be expected and looking forward to seeing you in June – it is still June? Please let me know.

Petunia

30 March, 1990

Dear Petunia,

Yes, it is still June, if nothing else goes wrong. I’ve never seen such a run of bad luck. Chin up, dearest, we’ll pull through somehow. When I get home, the first thing I want to do is –

(A few paragraphs of rather graphic endearments are omitted.)

Have you had any luck concerning our son?

Yours,

Vernon

4 April, 1990

Dearest Vernon,

No luck with our Duddikins yet. They say I still haven't proved I can take care of him. Six months, they say. Six months in one place, with one job. Perhaps you can help me manage it once you're back.

Imagine, Vernon, the three of us together again. Just a normal family, with nothing at all strange or odd about us. I can't think of anything I want more.

And as for your homecoming, the first thing I want to do is –

(A page of extremely graphic endearments is omitted.)

All my love,

Petunia

It was a marshy April day, and Ron, Harry, and Draco had been out jumping in puddles, a pastime in which they delighted. The girls had elected to stay home, much to their mothers' relief.

Three rather damp boys sloshed up the path to the kitchen door of the Burrow and stepped inside before they noticed the argument in progress.

“ – warning you, Weasley, if you come around my house again waving your Ministry writs and demanding to search, I'll – ” The speaker, a man who would have been puny if it weren't for his air of self-importance, broke off, looking at the boys in their hooded raincoats and boots. “Well, what have we here?”

Beside Harry, Draco froze.

“My son and some of his friends,” Mr. Weasley said coldly. “Go upstairs and play, boys, this doesn't concern you.”

“Yes, sir,” Ron said, and began peeling off his rain gear even faster than before.

Harry turned back to Draco. “What's wrong?”

“I know him,” Draco said quietly, bending down to take his boots off. “I know his voice. He used to visit the manor. He might know me if I take my hood down.”

“Everyone is under the law, Nott, no matter how much gold you have,” Mr. Weasley was saying.

“Don’t say anything,” Harry cautioned Draco as the boys finished shedding their outer clothes. He slapped Draco’s arm and shouted, “Tag!”

Ron caught on immediately and tore across the kitchen and up the stairs with Harry. “Hey, no fair!” Draco yelled, and ran after them.

“I told you not to talk,” Harry said emphatically at the first landing.

“I didn’t talk. I yelled.”

Harry sighed.

“You look like your dads when you do that,” Ron noted. “Only reversed. I mean, you look like Mr. Pat,” he pointed at Draco, “and you look like Mr. John, Harry. If that makes any sense.”

Draco shrugged. “We grew up with them both, it makes sense. Come on, let’s go see what the girls are doing.”

“What are their names?” Patroclus Nott asked.

“The boys? I don’t see why you’d be interested in them.”

“Call it curiosity.”

“Harry and Drake Black. Cousins. They live in the village with their parents.”

“Wizards, I assume. Even you would hardly let your child run around with Muggles to that extent.”

Arthur Weasley gave a small, tight nod.

Drake. An unusual name. But a coincidence, surely. He may be the right age, but his looks are all wrong. If he were the Malfoys' son, he would be much paler, a silver-blond as I remember Lucius being, not this boy's syrup color.

And I need not even begin to comment on his behavior.

Still, it does give me an idea for tonight's story...

Patroclus Nott understood the value of his son and heir, Theodore. He personally oversaw the selection of the boy's tutors, and he spent an hour with the child every day, usually before his bedtime. Often he would tell Theodore a bedtime story. The practice, although vulgar in and of itself, was invaluable for indoctrinating the child with the truths of his world.

And one of the most useful stories I have is the one of The Boy Who Disappeared. For I can make up hundreds, thousands, of fates for Draco Malfoy, each as improbable and each as possible as the next. And depending on what Theodore has done that day, the fate of the boy in the story will occur because of some crime or fault he committed himself.

Theodore always came when he was called, due to several renditions of a tale in which the Malfoys' son had been eaten by a werewolf after not coming indoors when he should have. His table manners were exquisite, thanks to the story that Draco's mother had murdered him and buried his body beneath the floorboards of the kitchen for slurping his soup. It helped, of course, that Theodore seldom saw his mother except at mealtimes.

So tonight, I think, the ultimate horror.

Tonight, I tell the tale of Draco Malfoy, stolen from his family and raised by Mudbloods.

"... he worked all day, like a house-elf, with never a word of thanks or a look of gratitude. All that he got in return were pitiful meals, outworn castoff clothing, and a pallet in a corner of the kitchen. The

children of the household lorded it over him, ordering him around, and the adults gave him orders and blows in equal measure. And worst of all, he did not even know that he was a wizard, for it had been hidden from him by his 'masters'. He knew that they were witches and wizards – though, being Mudbloods, their power was pathetically weak – but he did not know it of himself.”

Ah, Aristotle. Pity and fear, the two emotions you said drama should evoke, and my darling Theodore feels them both. Pity for the boy in the story, and fear that such a thing could happen to him...

“You get back here, Draco Black, don’t you dare leave your brother and sisters with all the work!”

“But Danger, I have to practice tonight, so I’ll be ready for Luna’s lesson tomorrow!”

“You can practice after the table’s clear. Come on.”

“All right.”

“Thank you, love,” Danger said, dropping a kiss on Draco’s head as he passed.

“What’s for dessert?” Draco asked, starting to stack the plates.

“Harry and I made cupcakes this afternoon.”

“You made cupcakes?” Draco stared at his brother. “I’m not eating them.”

“They’re perfectly fine,” Padfoot said, smacking Draco lightly in the back of the head with the clean end of the wooden spoon he was carrying. “I had three, and I’m not sick, am I?”

“No, but you should be,” Moony said. “You have the most amazing appetite, Sirius. I’ve never met anyone who eats as much as you.”

“Ron Weasley eats a lot,” Hermione said, half-turning from the sink where she was rinsing the dishes that Letha was washing. “Almost as much as Padfoot.”

“And he’s barely turned ten...” Danger said in tones of wonder.

“We’d better warn the house-elves next time we visit Hogwarts, then,” Draco said, carrying his stack of dishes to the sink.

“All right,” Meghan said, collecting the cutlery. “You can warn them about yourself when you do.”

“I don’t eat that much!”

“Oh yeah?” Meghan stuck her tongue out. “You should watch yourself some time.”

“How?” Draco demanded with some justice.

“Oh, bother,” Neenie said unhappily.

“What?” asked two or three voices together.

“I’ve got a stain on my blouse.”

“You’ve almost outgrown it anyway,” Aletha said practically. “And there’s a hole in the sleeve.”

“We need to go shopping sometime soon, everyone’s getting too big for their clothes again,” Danger said, making a note on the to-do list that always sat on the desk in the corner of the kitchen. “You know,” she said to Moony, “maybe if we didn’t feed them so much, they wouldn’t grow so fast...”

The cubs booed.

“What happened to him, Father?” Theodore asked, wide-eyed. “Did he ever escape? Did he ever find out he was a wizard, and get to Hogwarts?”

“You shall have to tell me, my son,” Patroclus said seriously. “Draco Malfoy is your age, after all. Keep your eyes open on your first day of school. And if you happen to see a small and skinny boy with pale blond hair, in clothes too large for him, who looks as if he does not know what to do, do offer to be his friend.”

“I will,” Theodore promised solemnly.

But, of course, you will never meet such a child. Draco Malfoy is in all probability long dead.

On 14 June, 1990, many things happened, but only two of them were at all important to this narrative. Firstly, Luna Lovegood celebrated the ninth anniversary of her birth with a small party at her home, involving her parents, her three best female friends, and, more peripherally, their brothers.

Secondly, Vernon Dursley became something he had not been for more than eight years.

Free.

Petunia was waiting for him in the parking lot of the police station where he was released from. They drove to her small flat in silence.

The rest of the afternoon and evening were not so silent. In fact, the neighbors complained the next day. Vernon and Petunia were highly apologetic, “but you understand, he’s had to be away for so long, and we’ve missed each other terribly...”

Then the Dursleys began to make plans.

Find Vernon a job, of course, was high on the list.

In six months, reapply for custody of Dudley came only slightly below it.

But there was no doubt in the mind of either Mr. or Mrs. Dursley that if they had not taken their nephew in on that fateful November morning, this would never have happened to them.

And so number one on their list was, Never permit those abnormal freaks to come near us again.

It has been said that God has a sense of humor. Those who do not believe in God still admit that often the universe does seem skewed slightly towards the odd and humorous.

That which had struck down the Dursleys with the Threefold Curse of the Righteous – addressed in the invocation as “All that is right and good in the world” – might not be God, or a god, but it most certainly had a sense of humor.

“Gentlemen,” Sirius said, addressing Fred and George Weasley politely if perhaps not accurately. The twins were sitting on identical Cleansweep-model brooms, belated twelfth birthday gifts from their parents. “We are here to teach you the noble art of Beating.”

“The most important part of Beating is awareness,” Aletha took over the talk. “Never lose track of where your partner is, where the Bludgers are, where the other Beaters are. You two have an edge, being twins – you’re used to sensing where the other one is. If you practice enough with your partner, you should be able to do things like this.”

She waved to Harry, who released one of the Bludgers from its box. It swooped up, hovered for a moment as if getting its bearings, then went straight for Sirius and Aletha. They moved from a hover into fast, even flight, with the Bludger chasing them, and without even seeming to consult with each other, they swung their bats smoothly up and around, trapping the Bludger between them.

“The Black Sandwich,” Sirius said, wheeling around in the air as Aletha pivoted. “Patent pending.”

They released the Bludger, and Aletha struck it a hard blow, sending it flying down the clearing toward the twins. George brought his bat up and around, hitting the Bludger back up towards the adults, and

the game was on. At first, it was simply a game of volleys, but then Sirius hit the Bludger to Aletha instead of to the twins, and it became a flying game of Keep-Away. That, in turn, mutated into “let-the-Bludger-chase-your-partner”, which ended when Fred missed his swing and hit George in the head.

“We’ll keep training with you as long as you want,” Aletha promised as they landed. “You’re pretty good already – by this fall, you should be spectacular.”

“Pretty good, nothing,” Sirius said. “You’re excellent. You fly like human Bludgers.”

“Remember, though,” Aletha cautioned, “hitting your opponents with your bats, although satisfying, is against the rules, and generally frowned upon.”

“Depends on who you’re playing against, and who’s refereeing,” Sirius pointed out. “But I wouldn’t want to encourage you to break the rules.”

“You wouldn’t?” Aletha, Harry, and the twins said in chorus.

Sirius smiled his most charmingly. “Well – not in public.”
Anita Lovegood had a new project that fall. One she had been hoping to do for quite a long time, but had never had the time for until now.

She was going to see if she couldn’t improve upon the basic scrying spell.

It was so limited, after all. One could only shift the view so far before one had to choose a new focus point, and then the view was curtailed by that. And often, depending on how powerful and skilled you were, you couldn’t even see the next town, much less another country.

Anita’s dream was to create a simple, workable scrying spell that would allow anyone to see as far as they wanted. She knew it was unlikely to come true, but wasn’t that the point of having a dream?

She heard the door behind her open and close. No voice announced its presence. Luna, then. Her daughter had permission to come and go from the workroom as she liked, unless specifically forbidden to enter or told to leave. And this should be just fine for her to see. In fact, it would be useful to have another set of eyes around. Sometimes scrys refused to be seen by anyone but their caster. Anita hoped to work around this limitation as well.

“Where are your friends?” she asked without turning around, uncorking the bottle where she kept the potion she scryed in.

“Outside playing Hogwarts,” Luna said. “Neenie is the professor. She’s setting everyone lessons. I don’t want to do lessons. So I came in.”

“Yes, Neenie is rather the professor type,” Anita agreed, pouring the silvery potion into a bowl. “But you seem to like her a lot, Luna. Will you miss her when she goes away to school next year?”

“She’ll only be there for a year before I’ll be there too,” Luna said philosophically. “And Ginny will still be here with me, and Meghan Black. And you and Dad will still be here.”

“That’s right, moon girl,” Anita said lovingly, lifting the filled bowl and turning to Luna, who was sitting in her usual chair at Anita’s worktable. “We’ll always be here with you.” She carried the bowl carefully to the table and sat down in her own chair.

“Are you scrying?” Luna asked. “What for?”

“Well, I thought I’d start with the Weasleys and the Blacks. I doubt they’ll mind if I invade their privacy just a tad.”

The scry displayed the interior of the Burrow perfectly well, revealing Molly Weasley happily listening to the wireless and knitting, but refused to show the inside, or even the outside, of the Marauders’ Den. “That’s odd,” Anita said, frowning. “It’s as if they’ve put anti-scrying on their house. I wonder why they’d do that.”

Luna gazed into the bowl. “Maybe they don’t want to be spied on,” she said dreamily. “Can we look at something else?”

“All right,” Anita said, smiling fondly at her most unusual but quite lovable daughter. “Let’s try for distance now.”

She began the spell, setting it on the coast of the English Channel. Then across, to France. Farther and farther she went, through the continent of Europe, skipping from cities to villages, from fields to forests. It was crystal clear, every detail of the picture perfect. Anita felt a thrill of triumph.

Then she stopped, shivering.

Why am I cold?

She looked deeper into the bowl.

The scry showed a patch of forest, one where the shadows seemed to lie unusually thick and deep. Nothing moved among the trees – no animals, no birds, nothing. But no, wait, was that something behind that tree?

Anita moved to fix her scry on the flicker of movement she had seen –

And her bowl exploded into a million pointed fragments, all shooting outwards, outwards towards her –

Towards Luna –

Anita dove at her daughter, knocking her to the floor, sheltering her child with her own body –

Pain, everywhere, but mostly in her chest and her throat –

And then nothing.

Gerald Lovegood was in his study when he heard the muffled sound of shattering pottery.

He found his daughter staring at her mother's bleeding body. "She protected me," Luna said, her eyes wide with astonishment and confusion. "The bowl exploded. She protected me."

Gerald stared at his wife's body for one more moment, then gathered his child to his chest and began to sob. Luna wept with him, almost silently, as though she still did not understand.

Carrie Black found them still standing like that when she stepped through the fire nearly an hour later, to keep her lunch date with Anita.

It was 25 September, 1990, and Luna's life had changed forever. Luna cried for her mother for nearly a month, then gradually seemed to return to normal, as much as normal had ever applied to her. Gerald was still pale and thin, often working late hours and asking Molly Weasley or Carrie or Danger Black to watch Luna until he returned.

"I have her ring," Luna said to her wide-eyed, listening circle of friends one day in November. "Her wedding ring. Dad gave it to me." She pulled a chain out of her blouse with the ring hanging from it.

The Black children all pressed a hand to their chests simultaneously.

"She loved me very much," Luna said solemnly. "And I miss her a lot."

Drake looked like he wanted to say something. Luna turned to him, waiting.

"I know you do," he said finally, sounding a bit uncomfortable, but as if he had to say whatever it was. "And you always will. But I'm glad you're better. It wasn't the same without you."

Luna gave a small smile. "Thank you," she said. "Do you want to work on our duet piece now?"

“If you do.” Drake stood up too, and headed for the stairs to get his flute from the bedroom. Luna went to the piano and began her warming-up exercises.

As Drake returned with his instrument, Luna modulated her scales into something else. It began with a low, steady beat in the left hand, then began a playful-sounding melody in the right, which returned again and again, always a little bit different but always recognizable. The piece ended abruptly, with a strange, dissonant chord which lingered in the air.

“I wrote that,” Luna said quietly into the listening silence. “For my mother.”

The silence lasted another moment. Then Harry began quietly to applaud. Hermione and Ron followed him. Ginny and Meghan joined in. Both were crying openly.

When the applause had stopped, Luna nodded to her audience, then glanced at Drake to make sure he was ready, and without further preamble began the opening measures of their piano/flute duet. Danger’s birthday cake that December had thirty candles on it. Before blowing them out, she very pointedly closed her connection with Remus.

What was that for? he asked as soon as she reopened it, having blown out all thirty with one breath.

They say if you tell what you wish for, it won’t come true.

As long as you’re not wishing for something like me to wake up tomorrow covered in purple polka dots.

Not a bad idea, but no.

Remus groaned mentally. Damn it, I forgot the first rule of living with other pranksters.

Never, ever, ever say anything that could be construed as a suggestion?

Yes.

Too bad for you, then.
The next morning...

You are going DOWN, woman.

Why? They're not purple. They're orange. It's a better color for you anyway.

The month went on, and Christmas decorations began to pop up everywhere. Even the offices at the Ministry sported them.

The latest arrival at the Floo Network Authority did not appreciate them. She had not appreciated anything for a long time.

They will not escape my wrath forever, she had said once in righteous indignation. But that had been six years ago, and she was no closer to finding out who had so grievously injured her master and ruined his good name forever than she had been at the time.

And he was no closer to power. That rankled her the most. That he, who was so good, so capable, should be denied the office he so richly deserved.

Her own demotion was a minor, but also bothersome, point.

This office is such a mess. There are notices and files from two and three years ago simply lying about.

To take her mind off her troubles, she decided to organize the place.

For other reasons as well, of course.

Everything I do is done with an eye to advancement. The higher I go, the more power I gain, the more likely I am to find them, and the more able I will be to help him return to his rightful place.

Several long, dreary hours later, she began on yet another pile of fireplace name-change forms.

And stopped dead, staring at the one in her hand.

Date: 14 January, 1988

Fireplace Name Requested: The Marauders' Den

Current Name of Fireplace: None (dwelling previously belonged to Muggles)

Reason for Denial: Name is already in use by house previously known as "Number 71 Crozer Street, London"

Reason for Appeal: House using the name is no longer occupied

Result of Investigation: Number 71 Crozer Street has been abandoned for several months. The name "The Marauders' Den" is hereby granted to applicants Patrick and Carrie Black, of Ottery St. Catchpole, Devon.

The woman stared at the form, and very slowly, a smile began to spread across her wide face. Carefully, she slipped from the office, sliding the precious piece of parchment beneath her knitted pink cardigan.

I do believe that it would be my duty to bring this to my master's attention, and explain what I know, and what I suspect.

This could be exactly what he needs to return to power.

Credit for the single-handed discovery of the most notorious criminal in England.

(A/N: Nasty cliffy, as promised...

Attention everyone: Each of the past three chapters – 35, 36, and 37 – have covered a year. Harry, Draco, Hermione, and Ron are currently ten. Ginny and Luna are nine. Meghan is seven. Now you can stop asking.

Warning: warm fuzziness is over. We have just hit the major build-up to the climax. Next chapter: “Don’t Look Back” – which might sound familiar to VERY careful readers – if not, I suggest another look at Chapter 12. Don’t go away now!)

Chapter 38: Don't Look Back

23 December, 1990, dawned cloudy, snowy, and late, being one of the shortest days of the year. The Pack, nonetheless, was up early.

"The earlier we're up, the tireder the cubs are when we go to den tonight," Aletha said as she systematically removed the covers from Sirius, who was pretending to be asleep. "You know perfectly well that sunset's around four tonight," the quilt came off the bed, "and moonrise is the same time," the blanket Danger had crocheted followed it, "and that makes for a long night," the woven blanket slid to the floor, "and the cubs tend to be calmer when they're tired," the sheet was removed, "and Remus usually prefers it calm on his transformation nights."

Sirius did not respond.

Grinning wickedly, Aletha remedied that with one swift pull.

"Hoy! Gimme those back!"

"Come and get them."

"Why, you little..."

Aletha waved the purple pajama pants like a flag. "They're right here. Come on, right here, jump for them, doggy."

Sirius growled, transformed into Padfoot, and did just that. Aletha jerked the pants away –

But Sirius had anticipated her, and landed where his clothes now were rather than where they had been, pulling them out of her hand with one tug. He retransformed and smiled smugly at her around a mouthful of pajama.

"Is that the new look this year, holding your pants in your mouth?" Remus asked quizzically from the doorway. Neenie and Meghan peered curiously around his legs.

“Fuh ug, oo,” Sirius said around the mouthful of cloth.

“Sirius Valentine Black, in front of the cubs!”

“All I said was, ‘Shut up, Moony,’ ” Sirius protested, taking the clothes out of his mouth.

“That is NOT what it sounded like. You – ” Aletha rounded on Remus. “Out. You – ” She turned back to Sirius. “Get dressed. And me – ” She stopped.

“Yes, what will you do?” Remus asked.

“I’ll... make the bed.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Remus said with a small bow. “I leave you to it.” He closed the door.

The cubs spent the morning out in the snow with the Weasleys and Luna. With all the Hogwarts-going Weasleys home for Christmas, there were enough people for a grand snowball fight, five on a side. (Percy disdained to join in anything so childish.) Once they were tired of that, there were snowmen to build and snow angels to make and sliding down the hill to do.

Wet, cold, happy cubs arrived home for lunch. “It’s snowing again,” Harry announced as he came in. “Loads harder than it was.”

“You can barely see anything,” Draco put in, shedding his coat. “We almost got lost just coming back.”

“We did not,” Neenie said, flicking her mitten at Draco and showering him with half-melted snow. “But it is snowing hard.”

“I got Fred in the face,” Meghan said happily, bouncing into the kitchen. “Or maybe it was George. I can’t tell them apart.”

“No one can tell them apart,” Sirius said. “It’s part of the secret to their success. They confuse people simply by existing.”

“Hmm, I don’t know anyone who does that,” Danger said far too innocently.

Sirius threw his quill at her. She caught it and put it in her apron pocket.

“I need that back.”

“Shouldn’t have thrown it at me, then.” Danger turned back to the stove. Remus took a casual step closer to her, then lazily flicked his hand out towards Harry, who intercepted the missile and lobbed it overhand to Sirius.

“And it’s Lupin to Potter to Black – a classic combination, ladies and gentlemen, just classic,” Draco said in his best announcer voice.

Danger checked her pocket, then smacked Remus on the back of the head. “Whatever happened to marital unity?”

“It was overridden by Marauder unity,” Sirius said, pumping his fist in the air in triumph. “At last, a man with his priorities straight.”

Neenie sidled up next to Sirius and laid her hand on the table, then handed something to Meghan, who skipped innocently out of the room.

“And a successful steal by the junior feminine contingent!” Draco put dismay into his tone.

“I notice you didn’t bother to tell me while it was happening,” Sirius said just a trifle huffily.

Draco shrugged. “I’m just the commentator, I didn’t do it.”

“Aiding and abetting is a crime, Draco,” Remus said warningly.

“One you’re all guilty of, in fact,” Sirius noted. “Just by virtue of having this conversation with me.”

Remus spread his hands. “In this isolated instance, a crime I am happy to commit.”

“Does this belong to anyone here?” Aletha asked, coming into the kitchen holding the quill. “It was just delivered to me by a certain little gem with a very smug smile.”

Lunch over and dishes done, Danger caught herself yawning. I suppose a nap wouldn’t hurt. After all, no law says we have to sleep when the cubs do on den-nights. Or even when Sirius and Letha do. It’s not as if we’ll wake anyone by talking, certainly.

Oh, just go take your nap already, Remus said in mock disgust. Women. They always have to talk three sides around everything.

Danger stuck out her tongue at him and stretched out on the couch. She expected to lie there for a while, letting sleep drift slowly over her, as it usually did. Not today. Today, sleep ambushed her, hauling her away wholesale almost before her eyes were shut.

And once she reached dream state, she realized why.

Poems. Why did it have to be poems?

Not even five minutes after she had lain down, Danger snapped upright with a half-stifled scream that brought the rest of the Pack running.

What is it? Remus demanded. What’s wrong?

“Wait,” Danger panted out, embracing him and holding on tightly. “Just... wait a second. You’ll know.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Sirius said darkly.

Danger turned her eyes to a high point in the room. Everyone followed her gaze.

There was a flash of flame there, making the cubs all exclaim. A red-and-gold bird appeared out of the flame with a scroll in its beak.

“Fawkes,” Remus breathed, releasing Danger with one arm to offer it to the phoenix, who landed softly there and offered him the letter. He took it and scanned it quickly, and Danger felt his shock, a flare of fear quickly replaced by resolve.

“Why wouldn’t Professor Dumbledore just firecall us?” Harry asked, looking at the phoenix in awe.

“Because he can’t,” Remus said grimly. “Listen. The Ministry knows where to find you. They have cut off your Floo connection and are making preparations to surround your house. I estimate you have eight to ten minutes before they will arrive. If you can escape, do so. If not, please try to avoid bloodshed. Remember, the truth is on your side, and I will stand your friend. If there is anything I can do, please respond via Fawkes. Godspeed. A.D.”

Neenie had attached herself to Remus. Harry’s eyes were very big. Draco and Meghan were both pressed against Sirius, who had paled at the first sentence. “Did you dream this?” he asked Danger quietly.

“I did.”

“And what to do now?” Aletha asked.

“Yes – but it’s very strange, I don’t understand it at all.”

“Maybe we will,” Remus said, as Fawkes crooned softly. “Time is short, love. Let’s hear it.”

Danger nodded and began.

“The time of testing comes apace;

“A time when every wolf must face

“The greatest fear or dread he knows,
“And pay a debt to one she owes.
“The only born cub must away
“To first friend’s home without delay,
“The warrior will the others free
“With change and help – still, they must flee.
“But first that magic must be done
“Which takes the eight and makes them one –
“Take that which circles blood and flesh,
“Yet has no bottom. Make it mesh
“With blood from each, and then recite
“The oath the warrior knows to write,
“Which long ago was sworn by they
“Whose hearts beat true in you today;
“The singing of the fire’s bird
“Shall help remind her what she heard.
“The testing time does quickly near;
“It lies in you to conquer fear,
“O lion-hearted wolf; so call

“The wanderer home to save you all.

“The eagle-hearted truth must give

“The star the sound that helped him live,

“And royal stars will trust in him.

“So life, not death, will bring this Grim.

“If then this night you can endure,

“Upon the morrow is it sure

“That hiding shall be done for aye,

“And only one have cause to cry.”

“That’s a riddle for good and sure,” Aletha said with a vexed sigh.
“And we don’t have time to figure it out. We need answers now.”

“It was the same voice as usual?” Remus asked. Danger nodded, and he grimaced slightly. “I wish it would speak to you again. Maybe give you a little help...”

Fawkes sang again, one soft, penetrating note, and Danger gasped as a new wealth of information flooded her mind. The voice had spoken again after the poem, giving her interpretations, telling her everything...

“The singing of the fire’s bird – the phoenix – I know, I know what it all means, I know what to do – but there’s no time to explain – ” Everything that had to happen, everything she had to do, unfolded before her, so simple, so sure – but could she do it? Not alone. She stared at her Packmates, meeting each pair of eyes in turn – grey, brown, blue and so familiar with the swirls of her own brown tinting

them, and the cubs, green, grey, hazel, grey... "Will you trust me? Even if what I say sounds absolutely insane, will you trust me?"

The cubs nodded quickly.

"With my life," Sirius said.

"With theirs," Aletha added, gesturing to the cubs.

Remus tried to touch Danger's mind, but she blocked him swiftly. Not this time, my love. God, I wish you could help me with this, but you have your own load to bear tonight...

"Did you have to ask?" he said softly, aloud, instead.

"Yes," Danger said on the release of a breath she hadn't recalled holding. "I can't explain why, there's no time, but I did have to ask." Fawkes fluttered to the sofa beside Danger as she closed her eyes for a moment. "Now we can begin. First – thank you," she said with feeling, opening her eyes and looking at her Pack. Better friends, a better family, no one could wish for. But there is no time... "All right. Sirius, go get the key to your Gringotts vault."

Sirius nodded and got quickly to his feet.

"Aletha, write a note to the Weasleys. Say we've been called away suddenly and would they please take care of Meghan until we come back. We're sending one of our vault keys so she won't be a burden. Something like that."

"All right." Aletha was halfway to the kitchen as she spoke.

"She'll need an overnight bag, love. Toothbrush, hair brush, a couple changes of clothes. And her lion. Can you do that?"

"Of course." Remus kissed his wife and followed Sirius up the stairs, leaving Danger alone with the cubs.

And now the hardest part of all.

“Meghan, little love.” Danger embraced the girl. “Your job is one of the hardest. Are you ready?”

Meghan squared her shoulders. “I’m a warrior,” she said. “I’m ready for anything.”

“You must walk out of this house as if nothing is wrong. You must walk to the Weasleys’ house and keep your head high and your feet light. And you must not look back. No matter what you see, no matter what you hear, don’t look back. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Danger,” Meghan whispered. “Do I have to go alone?”

No, no, I don’t want to have to tell her this, why me... “Yes. You do.”

Meghan’s lip quivered as she nodded.

“I’ll go with her,” Neenie said indignantly. “She doesn’t have to go alone.”

“No,” Danger said, a little harder than she meant to. She softened her tone. “No, Neenie. Not you, not Harry, not Draco. You three have a different road to take. Different from Meghan’s, different from ours.”

Draco swallowed hard. “You’re not coming with us?”

“No, little fox. We can’t. You heard the poem – this is the time of testing. The time of proving.” Danger leaned forward, getting all the cubs’ attention, as Fawkes began to sing softly. “This is the time when you prove that you are worthy to be called warriors. You have been protected all your lives. The time has come for you to be the protectors. You have been fought for all your lives. The time has come for you to do the fighting. Are you ready?”

Four fierce nods answered her.

God, I hope so. “Good. Come with me.”

The Pack gathered in the kitchen. Danger quickly scribbled two notes – one to Dumbledore, which she gave to Fawkes, who vanished in another burst of flame, and one which she pocketed. “Sit at the table,” she said, finding the materials she knew she needed. “Nenie, Remus, Harry, Sirius, Meghan, Letha, Draco.” She pointed at each chair in turn. “And leave that spot for me.” She indicated the chair between Draco and Hermione.

The Pack took their seats. Danger joined them, handing her second note to Remus as she did. He looked surprised and touched her mind, but she shook her head quickly, and he subsided.

“A sacrifice is required of us all today,” Danger said once the Pack was all quiet. “We give up something we love, to gain something which will benefit us all and tie us closer together. Will you do this?”

“We will,” the Pack answered, almost in chorus.

You may not, when you see what it is. Danger took a deep breath –

And pulled off her wedding ring.

A hush fell as she placed it in the middle of the table.

Remus stripped off his own and added it to hers.

Harry lifted the chain from his neck and placed it atop his Pack-parents’ rings. Draco did the same, first pressing the ring to his lips. Nenie followed him, and Meghan glanced at her mother before adding her own.

Aletha closed her eyes for one moment as if in pain, then pulled the sapphire ring from her hand and placed it on the pile. Sirius’ plain gold band went on top.

“We have given of our belongings,” Danger said. “Now we must give of ourselves.”

She picked up the knife she had taken from the counter and made a shallow cut in the flesh of her left hand. Blood welled up. She allowed it to drip onto the napkin she had ready. Then she extended her hand to Hermione.

The girl looked frightened, but slowly held out her left hand. Danger bit her lip and cut her sister's palm. Neenie gave a small gasp, but did not cry out. Her blood joined Danger's on the cloth.

Remus added his own blood and Harry's. Sirius cut his right hand and Meghan's left. Aletha cut Draco's hand first, before her own, and handed the cloth back to Danger looking fiercely triumphant.

Danger wrapped the rings and chains loosely in the red-stained cloth and nodded to Remus.

"We now will swear an oath," Remus said, his voice seeming almost to deepen as his full authority became apparent. "Hear me speak it first, and then look around you. If there is anyone here to whom you cannot swear this, depart now. For this oath is binding by magic, and the one who breaks it will never find rest, by day or by night, in life or in death. Hear me now –

"My hand in yours,

"My wand with yours,

"My life for yours,

"Now and always.

"Is there any here who does not wish to swear?"

No one spoke. No one moved.

"Then join hands, and speak the oath with me, three times, to make it truly binding upon us all."

The Pack joined hands, adults with cubs, and began to recite.

“My hand in yours,

“My wand with yours,

“My life for yours,

“Now and always.”

Danger felt a familiar tingling in her hands. Everyone else seemed to be feeling it as well. The cubs were wide-eyed, Sirius looked determined, Aletha had her eyes closed.

“My hand in yours,

“My wand with yours,

“My life for yours,

“Now and always.”

The second recitation had been firmer and more together. The tingling increased. Remus was staring at the rings in the center of the table, his expression unreadable.

As they began the last repetition of the oath, the eight voices of the Pack blended into one, which resonated in Danger's bones and sang through her blood, vibrating down her arms and into the hands she held, Neenie's strong and rough from her tree climbing, Draco's slender and callused from his music...

“My hand in yours,

“My wand with yours,

“My life for yours,

“Now and always.”

The napkin burst suddenly into flame, was consumed in an instant, and flickered out as if it had never been.

Where the rings had been, gleamed a confused pile of something gold.

Danger released Neenie's hand and carefully lifted a gold chain free of the pile. Four small medallions hung from it. "Everyone take one," she said, surprised at how tired her voice sounded. "Put them on. We're finished."

Slowly, the Pack released one another's hands, reaching out to the pile, disentangling chains and sliding them over heads. Meghan was the last to claim hers. Of the blood-stained napkin, not even ashes remained.

Danger looked once more around the table, meeting everyone's eyes. "Now the hardest part," she said slowly, hating every word. "Now we have to say goodbye."

"To whom?" Remus asked.

Danger took a breath, but it was Sirius who answered. "To the cubs," he said, his voice rough. "We have to say goodbye to the cubs."

"What?" Aletha gasped.

Danger nodded, meeting her friend's eyes, accepting and returning the anguish she saw there. "They must do – what they must do – by themselves," she said. "We cannot help them now."

Aletha smothered Meghan in a hug and gave one choked sob into her daughter's hair. Then she lifted her head, her face once more serene as it was wont to be. "What must be, shall be," she quoted. "How long are we likely to be parted?"

Danger wanted to scream, Don't ask, don't ask that, you don't want to know!

But she had to answer. "I do not know. It may be for as short a time as one night, or..."

"Or this may be the last time we ever see them," Remus finished very quietly. Danger hardly dared look at his face. He has to wonder why I keep blocking him... but I can't let him see what I know...

"Each of us has a task this night," she said to Aletha instead. "Our future rests on how well we carry them out."

"I understand," Aletha said quietly. She knelt to look into Meghan's face. "You will do well, my Pearl. You are a warrior, and a cub of the Pack. Make us proud."

The other adults each turned to a different cub and began to say their own goodbyes.

"I love you, Kitten," Remus murmured to Hermione, who was crying. "Remember to use your mind."

"You're your father all over again, Greeneyes," Sirius said quietly to his godson, ruffling his hair. "So don't do anything stupid."

"Be cunning and clever, my little fox," Danger whispered into Draco's ear as he clung to her. "And even if you never see us again, remember, we're as real as you are."

She felt him give a brief laugh.

We've done that much. We've taught a child to laugh and love. If we haven't done anything else worthwhile, we've at least done that.

All too soon, each adult had embraced and scent-touched each cub, and it was time.

"Go quickly, little Pearl," Danger said as Aletha helped her daughter into her boots. "And remember what I told you."

Meghan held out her arms for her overnight bag. "I remember."

"We are all here," Danger said softly, touching the girl's chest, where the newly created pendants hung beneath her coat and shirt, with Sirius' vault key beside them on the chain so that she wouldn't lose it. "Your Pack will always be with you, now. Our love will always be with you."

Meghan nodded.

"Go," Danger whispered, pointing at the door. "Go and don't look back."

Meghan turned away, lifted her head high, and opened the door.

Aletha buried her face in Sirius' shoulder, unwilling or unable to watch her daughter walk out the door for what might be the last time.

Once the door was closed, Danger straightened up with an effort. "You three, come with me," she said to the other cubs. "We're going to the cellar."

"We'll see you in a minute," Remus said, sitting down at the table.

Danger nodded.

Harry was first down the stairs. Hermione, her face still tear-stained, followed, with Draco behind her, and Danger bringing up the rear. Once they were down, Danger led the way to the back entrance of the cellar, which was a set of stairs up to a pair of sloping doors built into the back of the house. The cubs and their friends liked to jump and slide on them.

Danger drew her wand and opened the doors, allowing in a blast of cold air, making the cubs shiver.

"Here are your instructions," she said, looking at the cubs she loved so well and forcing herself to see only the warriors under her command, waiting for her orders. "Listen and remember."

She closed her eyes and began to recite, feeling power building in her.

“Love that binds you, sisters, brothers,

“Help you understand the others.

“Seek the one whose cry you hear,

“For where she is, your prey is near.

“Pack of seven, Pack-friends two,

“Shall bring him unto justice true.

“And for to help you in this chase,

“I give you each a hunter’s face...”

Power suddenly streamed from her wand, given purpose and direction by her words. She heard three cries of surprise change, twist into something she did not recognize.

What have I done? her heart cried.

What you had to do, her mind replied coldly.

Danger fell to her knees, her strength giving out. “Run, my loves,” she whispered. “Run and don’t look back.”

She tried to open her eyes, to at least see them one last time, but got only a vague impression of grey.

So tired, she thought vaguely. I’m so tired.

Remus, she called silently. It’s done.

Good. Why have you been blocking me?

I had to. Danger curled up on her side, pulling her knees to her chest. Orders, you know. Promise me something?

Anything, love.

Don't forget to call me home. Otherwise I won't know where to come back to.

I don't understand.

I know. She felt the inward pull and sighed. I knew it had to come. But I had hoped I might be able to explain first...

Danger, you're talking as if you're going somewhere.

I am. I have to. And... if you don't call me... I might not be able to come back...

Might not be able to?

Don't forget...

Danger...

Love you...

DANGER!

Danger slipped away, falling, flying, she didn't know which, through whirls of color and sound, and starting to cry, as she heard her love calling her name, crying out for her, and knew he couldn't hear her answering him...

Sirius blinked and put a hand to his chest. "That's odd. This thing just got cold."

"Mine too," Aletha said, touching her chain. "Do you think it means something?"

“No,” Remus whispered from across the table.

“No, you don’t think it means something?”

“No!” He sprang up, knocking his chair over, and Disapparated before it hit the floor.

The Blacks looked at each other in confusion.

Then, from the cellar, they heard a cry like the howl of a wounded animal. Like a wounded wolf.

“NO!”

Sirius Apparated directly to the cellar, Aletha right behind him. They both froze at the sight that met them there.

Remus knelt on the floor, holding Danger’s lax body to his chest. Snow from the open doors swirled around him, but he seemed not to notice. Hoarse sobs tore their way out of him as he rocked back and forth, cradling his wife like a baby against him.

“No,” he was sobbing, over and over. “No, no, no. Danger.” Her name was a wail. “You can’t leave me now. Not now. Please, not now.”

Sirius drew his wand and closed the doors over his friend’s head. Aletha knelt beside Remus and gently took one of Danger’s hands in her own.

Remus looked up, as if just realizing that his friends were with him. “She’s gone,” he half-whispered, his eyes filled with tears. And looking odd in some way, but Sirius couldn’t pinpoint it...

They were blue, Sirius realized with a shiver. Entirely blue, with no hint of brown. “She’s gone,” he said. Oh Merlin, no...

“She’s gone,” Remus repeated, his voice catching. “I can’t touch her. I can’t feel her mind at all. It’s as if she’s...”

“She’s not dead,” Aletha said quickly. “She has a pulse, she’s warm, she’s breathing. She’s not dead, Remus. I don’t know what’s going on, but it’s not that.”

“She said to call her,” Remus said as if he hadn’t heard, staring at Danger’s face, relaxed as if in sleep. “To call her back. She told me to call her home. But how?” The last word was a cry of anguish. “How can I, if she can’t hear me?”

Sirius knelt behind his friend and placed a hand on his back. There was nothing he could say. Aletha brushed her fingers down her face and touched Remus’ cheek, offering him what small comfort she could in the way of the Pack.

They seemed to stay that way for a long time before the small pop of a well-accomplished Apparation drew Sirius’ attention. He turned, standing up as he did.

“Black,” said a familiar growling voice. “It’s been a long time.”
(A/N: Don’t think too hard about who this is, it’s not that difficult.

Note: The woman who found them was Umbridge. Just in case you didn’t get that.

Yahoo group poll results: The correct answers are: “Umbridge/Fudge/the Ministry comes calling”, “The Pack gets separated”, “Danger has another dream”, “Aletha cries”, and “Remus is not amused”. Thanks to all who voted, and my “What should happen to Wormtail” poll is still open, so go vote and let me know what you think!

Byot, by the way, stands for “Bring your own tissues”.

Sorry, everyone, but we are now entering the land of cliffhangers. Expect one pretty much every chappie for the next, oh, ten or so. And remember, I can’t write if I’m dead or being tortured! Next chapter: Some cubs, some adults, and some Snape, so stick around!)

Chapter 39: Open Doors

Aletha was furious with herself.

I'm supposed to be the level-headed one around here. I'm supposed to be the one everyone turns to when they need something. And I acted like a complete and total airhead.

Danger practically told me the cubs had to leave. Or at least that Meghan did. She asked me to write the note to the Weasleys, for heaven's sake! How could I not have realized?

But somehow or other, it went completely over my head, and then when she told me straight out that we had to say goodbye, I made a big fuss and cried and acted like an idiot...

She was carefully ignoring the fact that most mothers, confronted with the stark fact of their children having to leave them, perhaps forever, would have been unabashedly hysterical. She couldn't afford to be hysterical now. Being angry was better.

At the very least, it stopped her from having to think about the fact that her cubs were gone, and the rest of them were just waiting, waiting for...

A faint popping sound drew her attention, and Sirius'. He turned away from her and Remus to face the newcomer.

"Black," said Alastor Moody's growling voice. "It's been a long time."

"Moody," Sirius said neutrally. "So it has."

Moody regarded the tableau with his mismatched eyes and grunted. "Should have expected this, I suppose. Never did find you boys far from each other. And you, Freeman. How long've you been with this flying circus?"

"Eight and a half years," Aletha answered after a quick calculation. "Nine in April."

Another grunt. "Who's the other one?"

"Her name is Danger," Sirius said. "She's Remus' wife."

"Dead?"

"No. But we don't know what happened to her."

Moody nodded. "Fine. That accounts for the adults. Where's the children?"

"Gone," Remus said unexpectedly, hoarsely, still staring down at Danger. "They're gone. All of them. You won't find them. We sent them away."

"Nice try, Lupin, but it won't work. We've been surrounding this place for five minutes. No one's gone in or out in that time. One of our men did report tracks in the front lane, but they were covered by the time I got there. One set, he said, going straight out the door and up the road. Small tracks. Child-size."

"My daughter," Sirius said. "We sent her to a friend's house to stay. She's no part of this, please, just leave her alone."

"Fine. But our sources say you had four children living here, not just one. So where's the other three?"

"Were these doors open when you got here?" Sirius asked, pointing at the overhead cellar doors.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Just wondering. And no one left that way."

"No. We would've seen them. It's snowing hard, but not that hard."

Aletha closed her eyes as a brief wave of fear swept her. Oh, God, Danger, what did you do with them?

Sirius sounded tired as he answered Moody. "We don't know where the other children are. Danger brought them downstairs, and we found her like this a minute or two later."

"Long enough to kill them and hide the bodies, then," Moody said, his magical eye sweeping the cellar. "Or Vanish them."

Remus turned half-around, still holding Danger against him. "Don't say that," he spat, his voice filled with grief and anger. "Danger loves the cubs as if they were her own, she wouldn't, she couldn't do that."

"You'd be amazed what people can do," Moody said levelly, turning to look at Sirius. "I was. Still am, for that matter. Don't suppose you'd care to take a moment and explain."

"Will you believe me if I do?"

"Depends on what you say."

Sirius explained, keeping mention of Pettigrew's Animagus abilities out of the picture, Aletha noticed. He made it sound instead as if Pettigrew had Apparated away from the scene of the crime. Which could have been another way it happened, I suppose. But you'd have to have iron control, Apparating's never easy, and it gets harder when you're worked up or scared...

Moody listened with skepticism plain on his scarred face.

"Your turn," Sirius said after he'd finished. "You're retired. What are you doing here – and why are you talking to us instead of tying us up and bringing us in?"

"Second question first – because Dumbledore asked me to. Floored over to the Ministry and caught me just as I was leaving. Told me I could save myself time and trouble if I went in first and alone. As usual, he was right. Someday I'll figure out how he does that. As to

the first, I had my name down for your case before I retired, Black, and they called me up when they got their first real lead on you in seven years. And here we are.”

“Yes. Here we are.”

“So why don’t you get your wand out, nice and slow, with your right hand.”

Sirius gave a small smile. “Should’ve known you’d remember that about me.” He slowly drew his wand out and extended the grip end to Moody.

“Remembering things like that keeps me alive,” Moody growled, pocketing the wand. “You too, Freeman. Use your off hand, and take it slow.”

Aletha disarmed herself, then rose and joined Sirius behind Moody, who stumped forward and held out his hand to Remus. “Your turn, Lupin,” he said, almost gently. “Hers, too.” He indicated Danger.

Remus pulled out his own wand awkwardly and handed it over. He slid his hand into Danger’s pocket, then frowned. “She doesn’t have it.”

“Probably because she was using it,” Moody said grimly.

Aletha stifled a gasp.

“There’s lots of things you can do with a wand,” Sirius said soothingly, half to her, half to Moody.

Moody’s blue eye whirled in its socket. “You’re sitting on it, Lupin,” he said with a trace of humor. “Move.”

Remus moved to one side, and Moody Summoned Danger’s wand with his own. “I assume this means you’re planning to come quietly,” he said, turning back to face Sirius.

Sirius shrugged. "We wouldn't get far if we ran," he said. "Danger's unconscious, and tonight's full moon."

Moody looked at him searchingly. "Something strange about you, Black," he said slowly. "Are you telling me it never even crossed your mind to go alone?"

"Would you have arrested everyone else if I hadn't been here?" Sirius countered.

"Probably."

"Then there's no point in me running. Is there?"

"If Dumbledore hadn't intervened, there would have been," Moody said grimly. "The original plan was to send dementors in. With orders to Kiss you if they found you."

Aletha found herself in front of Sirius, with no recollection of moving. It was stupid and pointless, given that he was several inches the taller of the two, but memories of that July day in London kept sweeping through her, and she couldn't stop shivering. And I don't have my wand now, none of us do, we're helpless, we can't do anything...

If you don't have anything helpful to say, shut up, she told her fears firmly.

"Should I be flattered that I'm so terribly dangerous as all that?" Sirius asked lightly, sliding his arm around Aletha and holding her gently against him.

"I see that thing you call your sense of humor is still intact," said Moody dryly.

"To my friends' sorrow, yes."

Moody seemed about to smile, but instead he scowled. "Enough chit-chat," he said decisively. "Upstairs, all of you. Lupin, I'll take the woman."

“No,” Remus said roughly. “She’s mine, I’ll take her.”

“Don’t be stupid, you’ll hurt yourself. Let me make a stretcher for her.”

“No,” Remus said with finality, lifting Danger into his arms. Aletha marveled, in the part of her mind that wasn’t screaming in terror, that Remus could still sound authoritative, even worried sick about his wife, and even to someone who had a wand pointed at him.

And Moody, to her further astonishment (and, quite possibly, his), responded to that authority, stepping back and letting Remus carry Danger up the cellar stairs and into the kitchen. Aletha followed him, Sirius her, and Moody finished the procession, his wand never wavering from Sirius’ back.

It’s like a nightmare. Absolutely logical, except for the detail of being completely insane. We don’t deserve this, none of us do, we haven’t done anything!

Fear threatened to swamp her. Quickly, Aletha summoned anger to force it down. It must have worked – the young Auror who was first in from the yard in response to the green sparks Moody sent out the kitchen window looked absolutely terrified when he saw her face.

That’s right. Be afraid. Be very afraid.

I’m a Pack-mother. Threaten my cubs and die.

She stared down at her hands. Oh, my little Pearl, go quickly, and don’t look back...

Anger didn’t work as well against tears.

Molly Weasley looked up as a knock sounded at the kitchen door of the Burrow. She got quickly to her feet and hurried into the kitchen. “Meghan, good heavens,” she said, opening the door. “Come in, out of the snow. Why on earth didn’t you Floo over?” She took the girl’s

bag and looked behind her. "Where's Harry, where's Drake and Neenie? It's not like you to come alone."

"My mum said not to Floo," said Meghan, her voice sounding oddly strained. "She sent you this." She extended a small envelope. Molly took it and opened it, vaguely aware of children arriving from various corners of the house, drawn by some innate trouble sense her brood seemed to have...

Dear Molly,

We've been called away unexpectedly, and we can't take Meghan with us. I'm afraid I can't explain, it being a matter of some delicacy, but it's also fairly urgent. By the time you get this, we'll almost certainly have left. I'm terribly sorry to simply foist her off on you like this, but we truly didn't have anywhere else to send her. She has the key to the Black vault, number 711, on the chain she's wearing, to defray expenses in case we're gone longer than we expect. Once again, our apologies, and we'll be back for her as soon as we possibly can.

Thank you,

Carrie Black

Molly stared at the note. Strange. Very strange. Where on earth could they be going that they can take all the other children, but not Meghan?

"Where's everybody else?" Ron asked, and Molly was pulled out of her thoughts.

"They're all gone," Meghan said in that same strange voice, the one that sounded too old for her years. "I'm all alone now." Her eyes were beginning to fill. "I've never been all alone before."

"You're not all alone," Luna said matter-of-factly, drawing Meghan's attention. "We're here."

Ginny picked up Meghan's bag from where Molly had slung it over the back of a chair. "Is she staying overnight, Mum?" she asked.

"Yes, she is," Molly said.

"Let's go up to my room, then," Ginny said, holding out a hand to the younger girl. "You'll sleep in with me. We can talk up there."

Meghan nodded and took the offered hand, and they went up the stairs after Luna. Ron lingered in the kitchen for a moment, then followed them.

Molly opened the note and read it over again. A vault key. But they know our feelings about charity. They would only send us money if they thought they might be gone a very long time.

She shook her head, puzzling over the mystery that was the Blacks.

Never mind now. There's work to do. An extra bed to set up, and an extra place at the table, and it's two days to Christmas, if she's staying for the holiday we'll have to get her some presents somehow...

Having something to fuss over, as always, made her feel better. Meghan sat with her face in her hands in Ginny's room as Ginny and Luna fussed over where to put her things, trying her hardest not to cry.

Mama Letha. Dadfoot. Moony. Danger. Neenie. Draco. Harry. Their faces floated through her mind, their voices rang in her ears. She wanted them. She wanted them back so much.

She had, literally, never been alone. Every moment of her life that she could remember had been spent with her Pack. The only time she even knew about that she had been alone was when the Pack had been taken by Lucius Malfoy, and even then Dobby had taken care of her. And that hadn't lasted long. Only a few hours.

And I was too little to know.

Why couldn't I go with the others? Because I'm too little?

Fury filled her at the very thought. Ever since she had been big enough to understand what the difference was between herself and the other cubs, she had resented it. Why couldn't Dadfoot and Mama Letha have had the common courtesy to get married when Harry's dad and mum had, and have her at the same time as Harry?

Then we'd all be the same age. Then I could go to Hogwarts with them. As it is, I have to stay home three years – three years – after they go. That's almost half my life!

Meghan was very like her mother in many ways. One of them was the way in which they dealt with fear.

Meghan, though, was much younger, and had had much less practice in keeping her fear at bay.

If the others ever go to Hogwarts, her fear whined in her ear. If we ever see each other again.

Harry, she wailed silently. Neenie. Draco. I want you, I want you, I want you here, I want you now...

Her thoughts disintegrated into mental sobs, and she fought with all her might to keep them purely mental, not to cry in front of Ginny and Luna and Ron...

The cubs ran in silence.

Characteristically, Neenie was the first to break it. What are we going to do now? she asked, shivering as she ran and limping slightly. I'm cold and I'm getting tired.

We need to find somewhere to get inside before we freeze, Draco said. Harry? Where are we going?

Why are you asking me?

Neenie sighed. Because you're the alpha now, she said as if it should have been obvious.

What? Harry skidded to a halt and stared at his sister, her form barely visible through the blowing snow. I'm not the alpha. Moony is.

But he's not here, Draco said, sounding like it hurt him to say. And we might never see him again. We might never see any of the Pack again.

We are the Pack now, Neenie said with a slight quiver in her voice. And you're the alpha, Harry.

Why me? Why not Draco? He's older.

Oh, by five days, big deal! Look, Harry, I wouldn't make a good alpha. I make a good beta, like Padfoot does. Not an alpha. You're the alpha now. You have to be.

Why? Harry demanded again.

Neenie looked at him beseechingly. Because we don't know what to do, she said very softly. We're scared.

Yeah, well, so am I, Harry said roughly.

But you'll find a way to work around it. You always do. You can figure out what to do. We can't. We need someone to tell us.

Please, Harry, Draco said quietly. We really need you.

Harry sighed. Fine. All right. I'm the alpha. And my first decision is that we need to get inside. We're all going to freeze out here if we don't.

I thought I said that, Draco grumbled.

You made me the alpha. That means all the good ideas get to be mine too.

Is it too late to change my mind?

Yes.

Darn.

Neenie, what was that poem Danger said? That might tell us where to go or what to do.

Neenie tipped her head back, thinking. "Love that binds you, sisters, brothers, help you understand the others. Seek the one whose cry you hear..."

Wait! Draco said suddenly.

What?

I thought I heard something. Listen.

The cubs were silent.

All I hear is the wind, Harry said finally.

It wasn't an outside sound. It was like one of you said something, but it didn't sound like a word.

What did it sound like?

Like... someone crying.

But none of us are crying, Neenie said in bewilderment.

So we have to go find out who is, Draco said. "Seek the one whose cry you hear."

And I know who it is, Harry said with the sound of his grin in his voice as the answer came to him.

Who? the others asked simultaneously.

Meghan, Harry crooned in the way he used to do when Meghan was a tiny baby trying to grab his hair. Little Pearl-girl, can you hear me? Meghan, cooed a voice she knew. Little Pearl-girl, can you hear me?

Her head jerked up. "Harry?" she whispered.

"What?" Ginny said, turning to her.

"Nothing." Meghan bit her lip, fighting her tears even harder. I just imagined it, it was just my imagination, it wasn't real, it can't have been real...

I just imagined it, Meghan's voice whimpered in their minds. It was just my imagination, it wasn't real, it can't have been real...

No, it's real, Neenie answered quickly. It's like Moony and Danger have. Danger gave it to us. Meghan, where are you?

I'm at the Burrow. Where else would I be?

I didn't know, maybe you got lost.

I did not get lost. When did I ever get lost just going to the Burrow? Meghan's voice had lost all trace of tears and become indignant.

Stop it, Harry said. Meghan, stay there. We'll come to you. Come on, Draco, Neenie, let's go.

The three cubs raced along the snowy road. They knew where to go, and they were going to get there in record time.

After all, their sister was waiting at the end of the road.

Ron shook his head in bewilderment. Meghan had been all calm when she first arrived at the Burrow. Then she had cried when she got upstairs. Then, for a moment, she had looked totally shocked, then almost mad about something, and now she was smiling and happy and playing Exploding Snap with them at the kitchen table like nothing was wrong.

I don't think I'll ever understand girls.

Albus Dumbledore descended the staircases of Hogwarts, rehearsing what he was going to say. He was unaccountably nervous.

Perhaps because I know my actions could have an enormous effect on the lives and happiness of people I have come to care about. To care a great deal about.

It may have been a mistake to become so involved in the life of the Pack. This day was almost inevitable. And almost every outcome for it that I can anticipate is bad...

But not every consequence of it is inescapable. Not if a certain person will cooperate.

And it may be within my power to persuade him to that cooperation...

He knocked at the door.

“Enter,” called the man’s voice.

“Good afternoon, Severus, are you busy?”

Yes, of course I am busy. I am always busy. That question means he has something he wants me to do. “Not particularly, Headmaster. Do come in.”

“Thank you.” Dumbledore closed the door behind him. “Severus, I have a favor I wish to ask of you.”

I knew it. “What sort of favor?”

“A potion I would like you to brew, if you have the time, and if you are so inclined. It would be needed by three-thirty this afternoon, if you could do so.”

Snape checked the clock on the corner of his desk. It was just after twelve-thirty. I can brew most common potions in two hours or less, unless they specifically need a longer simmering time. “What sort of potion?”

Dumbledore met his eyes. “The Wolfsbane Potion.”

Snape allowed his eyebrows to rise. "Indeed." That is not a common potion at all. In fact, I doubt there are ten wizards in England who could brew it correctly. Or in under three hours.

However, I have no doubt that I can.

But will I?

"A... mutual acquaintance of ours finds himself in need, Severus. You could help him greatly, if you so desired. I cannot and will not force you to do this." Dumbledore left the sentence hanging.

But it would please him.

And it would put Lupin and his little family in my debt.

On the other hand, why should I exert myself to help him, given the manner in which we last parted?

"Did our mutual acquaintance desire you to ask me for this?"

"He did not. I am acting purely on my own initiative here. He plans to pass this night without aid. It will tax his strength greatly. Strength which he will need for tomorrow."

"Oh?"

Dumbledore sighed. "It will be common knowledge soon enough, and your position as Pack-friend entitles you to know."

I would gladly give up position and knowledge to be able to drop that ridiculous title. Still, Snape listened. Knowledge was knowledge, no matter how come by.

"The adults of the Pack have been arrested. Their trial is tomorrow. They will be spending tonight in the Ministry holding cells."

"Not in Azkaban," Snape said, allowing just a hint of his disappointment to show.

“No. Not in Azkaban.”

“And you wish me to ease Lupin’s night in prison,” Snape said, making up his mind. Pack-friend indeed. You forced me to become such a thing, old man, and I will not dance to your piping any longer. “No. I will not.”

Dumbledore’s eyes acquired the quiet sadness that so daunted most people. Snape carefully Occluded his mind and met the Headmaster’s eyes straight on. I am no puppet of yours, and no friend of Lupin’s or Black’s. Lupin can kill himself tonight for all I care.

Or, even better, kill Black.

“As you wish, Severus.” The Headmaster rose and left.

Snape closed his eyes and ran through his itinerary for the Christmas holiday. I have nothing tomorrow that cannot be put off. And if I did, I suspect I would put it off anyway.

Tomorrow, I will see Black and Lupin humiliated at last.

He wondered why that did not make him as happy as it should.

“Well, your bed’s all made up, Meghan, love,” Molly Weasley said, bustling into the kitchen where the children were sitting at the table playing cards, “and we’re having chicken for dinner, and I know you like that.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Weasley,” Meghan said, smiling shyly.

She is such a well-mannered child. And so sweet. It might not be so terrible if her family never did return...

Shame on you, Molly. The girl would be devastated if her family didn’t come back. And rightly so. I’ve never seen so devoted a family. The adults all dote on the children, and the children don’t take nearly as much advantage of that as I would have expected them to...

There was a scratching sound at the door.

“What on earth?”

A pitiful whimper joined it. Then another, and a low yowl.

“It sounds like animals,” Luna said. “Like a dog and a cat that want to come inside.”

“Well, I wouldn’t leave anything outside on a day like this,” Molly said with a glance at the window. The snow was still blowing past thickly. “Let me see what it is...”

She pulled the door open just a fraction. Two small things brushed by her ankles, and Meghan let out a glad cry. Molly turned to look.

Meghan was on her knees on the floor, brushing snow from the coats of a half-grown gray kitten and a white fox kit of similar size.

Odd to see a cat and a fox together...

Something brushed Molly’s fingers. She looked down.

A large, dark-grey – dog? – looked up at her hopefully.

“Do you belong with them?” she asked it. “All right, come along.” She opened the door enough for it to pass by her, which it did, then pulled out her wand and conjured towels. “Dry them off,” she said to the three staring children. “Come on, don’t just sit there, if we don’t get them dry they’ll shake all over the kitchen, and you’ll have to clean it up...”

Ron and Ginny grabbed towels immediately. Ginny went to work on the dog – no, it was almost certainly a wolf, now that Molly got a good look at it – and Meghan came to help her. Ron approached the cat gingerly, but seemed to gain heart when it started purring as soon as the towel touched it.

Luna took the last towel from Molly and gently wrapped up the fox, lifting it from the floor and carrying it over to the fire. "Mrs. Weasley, do you have any ointment?" she said. "Its paw is hurt."

The wolf whimpered and lifted his front left paw. "Aw, yours is too," Ginny said. "Mum, where do we keep the healing stuff?"

"I'll get it," Molly said, glad to see her children showing compassion for the creatures.

Though what we're to feed them I don't know... but I couldn't have left them out in the cold...

Luna looked carefully at the fox kit, now dry, with a bandaged paw, and curled in her lap. It looked back at her with eyes very like her own...

Eyes like mine?

She blinked slowly, allowing her eyes to drift out of focus, and thought hard about nothing. She had never been able to do this before, but ever since her mother had died, things had started appearing differently to her, as if she could see things now that she couldn't before...

The fox seemed to disappear in a mist. Out of the mist, stepped a figure. A human figure. A boy. He raised his head, and Luna looked into warm grey eyes, the fox kit's eyes, familiar eyes...

"Meghan?" Luna asked quietly. "Are these animals your family?"

Meghan, who had the wolf lying next to her and the cat in her lap, stiffened.

"Her family?" Ron asked, sounding bewildered. "How could they be her family?"

"If they were transfigured," Ginny said. "But why would you think they were transfigured, Luna?"

“Are they?” Luna asked again, ignoring the Weasleys.

Meghan closed her eyes for a moment, then looked at Ron. “Is your room still soundproofed?” she asked.

Ron nodded. “Mum and Dad don’t want to hear me practicing in the mornings,” he said. “Why?”

“I have to tell you a story,” Meghan said. “And it has to be secret.” She looked at Luna and took a deep breath. “Because yes. They are.”

(A/N: You know, quite a few of you have figured out little bits of the plot... now if there was only a place where you could talk to one another and put them together... oh, wait, there is! It’s called my Yahoo group! So if you want to discuss plot possibilities, go there! Now!

Bad news: Real life is intruding with a vengeance. I may be reduced to one update a week. Sorry...

Next chapter: “Close Every Door”. Special mention to anyone who can tell me the significance of that! Hint: it’s related to Aletha, and her part of the prophecy! Hugs!)

Chapter 40: Close Every Door

Sirius jumped as a sound like someone clapping their hands reverberated down the hall. Damn, I'm nervous. I need to settle down.

Of course, it's easier to do that when I'm not locked in and alone.

Yes, I'd say this is starting to rank pretty high on my list of all-time bad days.

He sat down on the bed in his cell and stared at the opposite wall. Don't look at the bars, he reminded himself. You'll only feel worse. Look at the wall. The nice, boring, white wall.

And be thankful for small blessings. Like light.

The cells each had a panel in the ceiling, which Sirius suspected was a window such as the Ministry of Magic had, but enchanted to give plain white light instead of showing a scene. The effect was very much like Muggle fluorescent lighting.

And it's starting to give me a headache.

What I wouldn't give to see real sunlight. What there is of it today. Third shortest day of the year, after all...

And it would have to be a full moon.

Sirius thought back to his Hogwarts years. Remus had usually spent the day before and after a full moon in the hospital wing, because the changes in his body started happening as much as twenty-four hours before the actual moment of moonrise, and the aftereffects could last as long or longer. In winter, when nights were so long, he might spend as much as four days there, two before and two after.

But with Danger with him, he's barely affected, before or after.

And now, with her gone...

The Aurors had taken Danger away, not quite by force, just after the Pack had been Portkeyed to the Ministry. The moment Remus released her hand, Sirius had seen him pale and his lips tighten. He had been limping when they escorted him away.

Tonight is going to be hard on him. God, I wish I could be with him, I can't do what Danger does for him, but I could at least help. And he's going to look terrible at the trial tomorrow... the Wizengamot's probably going to think I beat him up or something...

The trial. Sirius sighed. They had sent an officious little clerk around to collect his personal data – name, current residence, that sort of thing – and to inform him of the charges against him. Thirteen counts of murder, he knew already. Escaping from Azkaban, ditto. That he was being charged with Harry's kidnapping had come as something of a surprise.

That one, at least, I can prove I didn't do, Sirius thought, carefully steering his mind away from further thoughts of Harry. And I'm fairly sure it's not a crime to break out of jail if you're innocent. But it's going to be proving I'm innocent that's hard. Even if I offer to take truth potion, they'd say I'd done something to circumvent it – been ordered to tell a different story under Imperius, or been Confunded into believing my own story – after all, truth potions only detect whether or not you think you're telling the truth.

His hands closed slowly into fists. What we need is to find Peter. That's the only way we could prove, beyond a doubt, that I didn't do it. Come to think, that would get everyone off the hook – the only charge they have against the others is aiding and abetting me, and if we could prove I'm innocent, that disappears too. Well, and the kidnapping for Remus and Danger, but they were taking Harry to give him back to his legal guardian – me...

The memory of their reunion in the little clearing in Scotland crashed in on Sirius. He recalled with utter clarity the way Harry's tiny, too-thin face had lit up with joy the moment Sirius had spoken to him – he knew my voice. My face had changed, but he knew my voice.

And we haven't been parted since then. Except when Malfoy had us, we've never been apart, until now...

Memories of that little episode started flooding his mind. Specifically, memories of the utter terror he'd felt when Danger told him where they were – when he had realized he was helpless, trapped, parted from his cubs, and at the mercy of his enemy. The only thing that had held him together through that had been the rest of the Pack.

And now we're parted too. Now I'm alone.

It was the thought he'd been trying to avoid for almost an hour...

An hour. That's good. Think about the time. Danger's dream had been around 12:30, and Moody had arrived at the Den at 12:45. The Portkey had taken effect at 12:52. His last sight of Aletha had been at 12:58. She had been holding her head high, in a pose that made him think of Meghan...

No. Don't think of Meghan. Don't think of any of them. You won't be able to stop...

The Aurors had locked his door at 1:00 exactly, and the file clerk had arrived at 1:07 and left at 1:19. It was 1:50 now. He looked at his watch again. 1:51.

Sunset is around four. And with sunset comes moonrise...

If we were home now, we'd be setting up for den-night – no, wait, we did that already, this morning after breakfast. I wonder what the Aurors who searched the Den thought of all the mattresses on the floor in the room with the Christmas tree?

The Christmas tree. Christmas Eve is tomorrow. We're going to be tried on Christmas Eve. There's something ironic about that, but I can't pinpoint it.

Oh, wait, could it possibly be that we're not supposed to be getting tried at all? Because we aren't criminals? That we ought to be home,

with our cubs, getting ready for the holiday, not here, in jail, with no idea where the cubs are or even if they're alive, separated, alone...

He was either going to cry or scream in a moment, he didn't know which.

"Someone help me," he whispered fervently. "Please."

The chain he wore around his neck seemed to grow warmer. Aletha walked back and forth in her cell, spacing her steps to match the beat of her heart. It might almost have been called pacing...

I am not pacing. I am not. Nervous people pace. I am not nervous, so therefore I am not pacing.

She sighed, admitting defeat.

Yes, I am. Pacing, and nervous.

Her mind was spinning. It had all happened so fast. Less than two hours ago, the Pack had been happy, secure, together. And now, they were scattered, separated from their cubs – three of them were missing altogether –

She pulled her thoughts away from that. At least I know where Meghan is. She's safe at the Weasleys'. Molly and Arthur will take good care of her.

Possibly for a lot longer than I want to think about.

Her mind skittered from her child to her child's father, her husband, her lover and beloved. Sirius. Oh, God, this must be terrible for you. I wish I could do something to help you, anything, but I can't, I'm here, and you're there, and I can't get to you...

Danger's voice echoed in her head.

"The eagle-hearted truth must give

“The star the sound that helped him live...”

Aletha froze mid-step. Maybe I can't get out... but a sound could. Can. Will. She clapped her hands, and the sound echoed satisfyingly along the corridor beyond the barred door.

But what kind of sound helped Sirius to live?

She sat down and closed her eyes, thinking of her husband, her mate, her other half, the only man she had ever loved, or ever wanted to love. Those months when I thought he had betrayed Lily and James, and killed all those people, were terrible. I don't know how much longer I could have gone on that way.

From there, it was only a short step to the moment of their reunion in her music room, and from there to the conversations they had had over the next few days. One in particular began to surface. Aletha held herself back carefully and allowed the memory to emerge on its own. It's like a child – like a shy child – the way Draco was when he first came to us. You make an overture, then allow it to make the next move.

And gradually, the memory became clear to her.

“My legs were starting to get tired,” Sirius said, holding a dozing Harry on his lap. It was a few days after the escape from Azkaban, and the Pack – only we weren't the Pack then, not yet – was all gathered in one room to hear the story. “And I still thought I was going mad. So I decided I wanted to hear you playing, Aletha – and I did. It was the one that goes like this.” He hummed a series of notes, five ascending, the last three again, then repeating.

“All right, now that's scary,” Aletha said. “Because I was playing that the night you escaped. After I got home from burgling the museum. And I was thinking of you while I was doing it.”

“It's possible we may have been connected somehow,” Remus suggested. “Danger's magic is still unpredictable. She might have connected us all, the way she and I are connected, but less strongly and temporarily.”

“And that would explain where I got the kind of power to pull you in to land that way,” Danger said. “If I had everyone’s magic to draw on and not just my own. I was watching you, you know,” she said to Remus and Sirius. “In my dream. I knew I was dreaming, I knew I was still in the truck, but I could see you out there, and I could hear you talking to me, Remus. I heard you say that you weren’t going to make it, and...” She shrugged. “I did something about it.”

“And I’m so very glad you did,” Remus said lightly as Neenie cuddled up against him.

“You saved my life, you know,” Sirius said softly to Aletha as Remus and Danger became otherwise occupied. “With the music. I forgot I was tired, listening to you. You’re probably the only reason I made it.”

“Then I’m so glad you could hear me,” Aletha said, leaning her head on his shoulder and allowing herself to rest secure in the comfort of her love’s presence in her life, a presence that, if she had her way, would never depart...

My music. That’s what I can give him. I can sing. I can tell him he’s not alone. No matter how many doors are between us, I’m still here with him.

And with that, she even knew what to sing. A piece by the same composer who was responsible for their favorite love-song duet, but in a very different style, it had originally been intended for a man’s voice, but transferred just fine to a woman’s...

And it’s perfectly in context. The singer has been imprisoned for something he didn’t do, and the story has a happy ending.

She stood and faced the door, closing her eyes. The chain around her neck warmed, as if approving of what she planned to do. Inhaling deeply, she hummed a note, allowing the hum to grow in intensity until the very walls seemed to be ringing with it.

That’s good. It’ll do for a starting note.

She imagined the introduction. Two sets of solemn chords on the piano...

The words were bitter, inviting the singer's captors to do their spoke of being closed off from the world, of having every moment be pain...

Her voice ascended the scale, then fell in skips, the singer realizing that answers to the questions were far away and not coming any closer...

A return to the main theme. Although every door might be closed, and loved ones kept away (she was amazed at the feeling she could put into that line), she would never be truly alone, Aletha sang. This theme had a different ending, upward-turning, hopeful, speaking of the singer's peace of mind, and the promise of a home, a land of their own...

Don't stop. Please, don't stop, Sirius pleaded silently with his wife. Please, don't stop yet. I'm almost there...

Her hum had come so quickly after his half-voiced plea for help that he could almost believe she'd heard him. He hadn't heard it at first, and when he had, had almost dismissed it as something normal – but when she had begun to sing, he hadn't been able to stop listening. And the song was doing something for him.

It's as if she turned on the light in my brain. I'm not alone. I may be alone right here, right now, but I'm never really alone. Not while I'm Pack. And not with this. He touched the pendant hanging against his chest. It has a little of everyone in it. No matter how far we are from each other, we'll always be together in our hearts.

He wasn't quite at the peace of mind the song was talking about, but he was getting there...

Aletha began to sing again, once more daring the captors to do their worst, to try and erase even her identity.

Sirius smiled, in spite of the content of the lyrics. No one, but no one, does venom like Letha. Not even Snape could sing it like that.

The image of Severus Snape belting out a musical theater tune almost made him laugh and miss the next stanza, speaking of how little the singer mattered, being only one person.

Sirius listened in awe as Aletha's voice flew effortlessly to the high notes. She changed keys upward and slowed down for what must be the final chorus, reiterating the sentiment expressed before – that she, and all who loved like her, would never truly be alone.

Sirius shook his head in wonder. Can that woman's voice ever carry. I have no idea where she is, but I could hear her as well as if she were standing right next to me.

And I feel like she is.

Thank you so much, love. That was exactly what I needed. No more despair. No more self-pity. Dumbledore was right – the truth is on our side. We'll come out of this all right. Somehow.

At 2 o'clock that afternoon, a Healer arrived at the holding cells. Her mission was twofold – examine a female prisoner who was unconscious, reason unknown, and interview a male lycanthrope.

She shuddered as she stepped from the fireplace, remembering the last time she had been in this place. This is exactly why I changed specialties into research in the first place, so I would never have to come here again...

But that was then, and this is now. You don't know this woman. You can't possibly know her.

She followed the Auror-trainee down the maze of corridors and into a small infirmary, where her patient lay unconscious.

Wait a second. Do I know her?

The face, relaxed as if in sleep, hovered just on the edge of familiar. No, I don't know her. Not exactly. I think I may have been introduced to her at some point. But it was a long time ago.

Banishing these perplexing puzzles for another time, she conducted her routine examination, and was left even more puzzled than when she had started.

She seems perfectly healthy – her body at least – but she's completely unresponsive. The closest thing I've ever seen to this is... She swallowed hard. She had only been up to the long-term care wards a few times in her career, and the one reserved for patients who were entirely incapacitated only once, as a trainee. And one of the people she had seen there had been a victim of the Dementor's Kiss.

She shook her head decisively. No. She can't have been Kissed. What would a dementor be doing this far from Azkaban?

Still, it seems very similar. As if her soul was somehow missing from her body – as if they'd been disconnected in some way...

"I can't make anything out of it," she told the mediwizard who usually staffed the infirmary. "The only thing to do would be wait and hope she comes out of it on her own."

The wizard sighed. "I was afraid that's what you'd say," he said dejectedly. "Do you want to see the other one now?"

"Yes."

He escorted her through a door at the back of the infirmary. "The quarantine cells," he explained. "There's only the one way out, so you won't get lost. It's the third one along here, on the right. These are observation cells, so there's a front space you can go in, with a chair, in case you stay more than a few minutes."

"Thank you." She didn't plan to stay more than a few minutes. The werewolf was likely to be angry, bitter, frightened, and all in all not very cooperative. She would try to get answers to a few basic questions, and ask permission to observe his transformation, which she was sure would be declined – it always was. Werewolves were

very touchy about allowing people to see them at their moment of greatest vulnerability.

With these thoughts in her head, she walked the short distance down the hall, until she was in front of the occupied cell. The occupant was sitting on the lower bunk, knees drawn up to his chest, head down, shoulders shaking. Gently, she cleared her throat to announce her presence. "Excuse me," she said when he didn't respond. "I'm Healer Tonks, I'd like to ask you – "

The man's head shot up. "Andy?" he said hoarsely, staring at her.

Andromeda dropped her quill.

"Remus?" she said in disbelief. "Remus Lupin?"

Her cousin's best friend gave her a slightly watery smile. "No one else." He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his cheeks, which were tear-stained. "May I offer you a seat?" He gestured to the chair in the front area of the cell, which was separated from the back by a second set of bars.

"Of course."

My plans have just changed. Dramatically.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, knowing it was a stupid question even as she asked it.

Remus shrugged. "I've been asking myself the same question for about an hour. I suppose they think I've committed a crime."

His sense of humor was even drier than she remembered. And decidedly more acidic.

"You're a werewolf, then."

"Since I was little."

“Before Hogwarts?”

He nodded. “Dumbledore made arrangements so I could attend.”

Of course he did. He believes the best of everyone. “Did Sirius know?”

“He did and does.”

“You know where he is?”

Remus smiled without any real humor. “Take a walk around this place. You’ll find him somewhere.”

“He’s been arrested?”

“We all were.”

“All,” Andromeda repeated.

“Sirius, Aletha, Danger, and myself.”

Andy vacillated between two questions, and went with the one she understood least. “Danger?”

“My wife,” Remus said shortly. “You’ve probably seen her, or will see her. Brown bushy hair, unconscious, no telling when or if she’ll recover.”

“I’m so sorry,” Andromeda said sincerely. “I did see her. I examined her, actually.”

“Any insights?” It was said lightly, but Andy could sense a desperate longing behind it, a need to know something, anything, about how his wife was.

“No. I’m sorry.” She was not, absolutely not, going to tell him the only similarity that had come to her mind. He was already emotionally

overloaded – knowing that his wife's soul seemed to be missing would probably make him hysterical, and she was not in the mood to see a hysterical werewolf.

“It's all right,” Remus said quietly, pressing a hand against his chest for a moment.

“So what does Aletha have to do with this?” Andy asked, trying to get the conversation back on a lighter track.

Remus gave a small smile. “You know Aletha's daughter?”

“Yes. Meghan, wasn't it?”

“It is.” His smile grew. “She's your cousin.”

“How so?” But the moment Andromeda had asked, the answer came out of nowhere and hit her in the face. “Sirius,” she breathed. “She's Sirius' daughter. Isn't she.”

“She is that.”

“I should have known,” Andy murmured. “I should have known. I just never bothered to put the pieces together.”

“Pieces?” Remus asked, frowning.

“I knew that Aletha had Draco,” Andy explained, fitting it together as she spoke. “And I knew that a boy named Harry, who was Draco's age, claimed to be Draco's cousin. And of course everyone knows that Sirius Black has Harry Potter.”

“Yes, that's true,” Remus said in bemusement. “But I would love to know how you knew those first two things you mentioned.”

Andy smiled with just a trace of smugness. “My Dora,” she said. “She spotted Draco under his glamour and wrote me about it. Both times.”

Remus smiled ruefully. “Wonderful. Found out by – an eleven-year-old, wasn’t she?”

“The first time.”

They talked for a little longer about the strange, eclectic family that Remus called the Pack, brushing past the topic of Sirius – Andy made a mental note to ask more specifically about him later – and finally she worked the conversation around to the topic of lycanthropy, and how Remus dealt with it.

“Do you send the children away at the full moon?” she asked.

“No, we all sleep in the same room. They used to sleep on top of me, actually. That’s gotten more problematic as they’ve gotten bigger – now they just use me for a pillow.”

Andy laughed. Then she took another look at his face.

He wasn’t joking.

“But... that’s...”

“Impossible?” Remus suggested. “Insane?”

To put it mildly. “Only a little.”

“You’ve heard of the Wolfsbane Potion?”

Of course I’ve heard of it, I helped develop it. “Yes.”

“Danger has magic that works similarly to the potion. We call her a werewolf tamer. Under her influence, I don’t lose my mind in the change.” He smiled thinly. “And I haven’t undergone a change without her since we met, almost nine years ago.”

Oh. Oh, dear. “And she has to be conscious to work the magic?”

“I don’t know,” Remus admitted. “But since I can’t be with her, it won’t matter much.” He turned his head to stare away from her. “The hardest part of this, for me, is being alone,” he said almost too quietly for her to hear. “When you live in a house with three other adults – one of them Sirius Black – and four children, you’re never alone for long. And Danger and I share a... special connection. We could always sense each other’s presence. But I can’t sense her now. And that scares me.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Andromeda asked impulsively.

“If...” Remus seemed to be having a hard time even saying it. “If there was any way we could be together. One last time. If there was some way to have the others here, or nearby – it wouldn’t be safe for them to be in with me when I transform, but just having them near would help.” He turned back to her. “This might be our last night outside Azkaban. It would be nice to spend it together.”

“If there’s anything I can do, I will,” Andy promised. She bit her lip. It was going to be terrible of her to ask this, but it was part of the job she’d come here to do... “Remus?”

“Yes?”

“Is there any way you’d consider... letting me watch?”

“Watch me transform?” He looked vaguely revolted by the idea. “It’s not pretty. And I warn you, the wolf’s likely to be more than usually violent tonight. He’s been caged for a long time. You are aware that werewolves self-mutilate if denied human prey?”

“Yes.”

“I have a suspicion that the wolf wants revenge on me, for meeting Danger, for taming him for these last eight years.” He met her eyes. “He might manage to kill me.”

It took her a moment to sort out the pronouns and realize what he meant. “You’re not saying...”

“It is a possibility. I thought you should be warned.”

Andy sorted through his words, his tones, and his body language, as Healers were taught to do and mothers learned by instinct, and came up with a terrible conclusion. “You want to die,” she said, managing to keep her tone in horrified territory, just short of accusing. “You think your wife is dead, so you want to die.”

Remus did not answer.

“What about the rest of your Pack?” she challenged. “What about Sirius and Letha, and your cubs?” She used his word for his children deliberately, and was pleased to see him flinch. I’m getting through. “Even if your wife is dead – which I don’t believe, and I’m a trained Healer – you have other people to live for. Don’t you dare give up yet, Remus Lupin. Don’t you dare.”

She got up.

“Where are you going?” Remus asked, startled by her abrupt movement.

“I’m going to talk to Aletha,” Andromeda said, resolve filling her. “And maybe to Sirius. And then I’m going to talk to someone in charge around here, and find out exactly what the rules are about housing two or more people in the same cell. It’s not over yet, Remus. Don’t give up. Please.”

“All right,” Remus said with a sigh. “I won’t.”

“Promise.”

“I promise.” He smiled slightly. “Bossy Andy.” It had been Sirius’ nickname for her.

“Always.” Andromeda returned his smile. “One more thing. When is moonrise tonight? Exactly?”

“3:58,” Remus answered promptly.

Andy checked her watch. It was 2:26. “All right. I’ll be back in about an hour to let you know how I’m coming.”

She stayed just long enough to hear Remus’ “All right” before hurrying down the hall, purpose in her steps.

I have an hour and a half to save a man’s life.

Every minute counts.

(A/N: Danger did the transfiguration of the cubs into animals (without consciously controlling it). The cubs are not Animagi. (Not yet, anyway.) More about Danger’s magic, and how it works, in future chapters.

Next chapter, “What Can We Do?”, coming as soon as possible – and in it, something happens you’ve all been waiting for! See you then! Don’t forget to review and Yahoo!)

Chapter 41: What Can We Do?

“Meghan?” Luna asked quietly. “Are these animals your family?”...

...“I have to tell you a story,” Meghan said. “And it has to be secret.” She looked at Luna and took a deep breath. “Because yes. They are.”

Ron’s mouth fell open. “They are not.”

“They are,” Meghan said. “And we can prove it. Up in your room.”

The cavalcade of four children and three animals clattered up the stairs and into the small, orange room. With Ginny and Luna sitting on the bed, Meghan on the windowsill between the tank full of frogspawn and the pile of comic books, and the wolf curled on the floor around the cat and fox, everyone fit.

Ron shut the door and turned to Meghan. “How?” he demanded.

“Ask Harry something,” Meghan said, pointing to the wolf. “Ask him something only he would know the answer to.”

“All right.” Ron closed his eyes in thought. “Got one. The last time we played chess, who won, and how?” He looked confident, as if sure the next few seconds would prove that his best friend’s little sister had gone out of her mind, and his world was still just as boring as it had been the day before.

The wolf stood up and gently nudged Ginny’s feet out of the way, sticking its head under the bed. It emerged a moment later with the battered box containing Ron’s wizard chess pieces in its mouth. Carefully, it pawed the box open and looked in at the pieces, which all screamed and tried to hide. The cat and fox stood up to watch.

Exceedingly delicately, the wolf opened his mouth and picked up one of the chess pieces, pulling back quickly as the others attacked his face. He delivered the kicking, yelling piece to Ron, who looked it over.

It was a white knight.

The wolf nudged Ron on the knee and barked once, quietly.

Ron nodded. "I did win," he said shakily, still staring at the knight. "And I had white, and I checkmated Harry's king with my knight." He looked at the wolf. "Harry?"

The wolf nodded firmly.

Ron leaned back against the door, his freckles standing out against his pale face. "This is way too weird for me," he said fervently.

The wolf – Harry – rubbed against him, in the manner of a friend patting another on the back after a shocking experience.

Ron looked at the wolf again. "Its – your – the eyes are the same," he said slowly. "Green. Bright green. And a darker ring of fur around the outside, like your glasses."

"Drake's eyes are the same," Luna put in. "Grey, like mine. That's what made me think to look."

"Hermione?" Ginny asked, holding out her hand for the cat, who came to her delicately and looked into her face. "They're hazel for sure – and I don't think cats have that color naturally."

"So it's true, then," Ron said, exhaling a long breath and sitting down on the floor. "I'm sorry, Meghan. It just – it sounded – "

"Weird?" Meghan finished. "The rest of it's even worse."

"How can it be weirder than it already is?" Ron asked.

Meghan looked at the floor. "We've been lying to you," she said very quietly. "We've been lying a lot."

"Lying? About what?"

“About who we are. And what we look like. Do you remember the first day we met? Well, I wasn’t there. But the first day you met Harry and Drake and Neenie?”

Ron nodded. “Never forget it.”

“And Luna asked if Harry was Harry Potter.”

Ginny was starting, for no reason she could explain, to get excited.

“And he said no.”

Ron nodded suspiciously.

Meghan swallowed. “He lied. He is.”

“I knew it!” Ginny exploded, jumping to her feet. “I knew it, I knew it, I knew it, I knew it, I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!”

Everyone was staring at her. She quickly sat back down on the bed.

“You did?” Ron asked, looking totally dumbfounded. “How?”

Ginny shook her head. “I don’t know. I just... I... I just did. I knew he had a secret. He would say things that didn’t quite fit with what you were telling everyone. I covered for him a couple times. He’s really Harry Potter?”

Meghan gave a little smile and a nod. “Has been all his life.”

“No way,” Ron said. “No freaking way. Come on, Meghan, there’s only so much you’re going to get me to believe. What’s next, your dad is Sirius Black?”

Meghan gasped. “How did you know?”

Ron gawked at her. “I was joking.”

“She’s not,” Luna observed.

Ron made an incoherent noise halfway between a squawk and a moan.

“Your dad is really Sirius Black?” Ginny asked incredulously, staring at Meghan.

Meghan nodded. “The Ministry found him,” she said sadly. “They found all of us. That’s why I had to run away, so they wouldn’t take me and put me with another family. Unless all the grownups ran away too, they got arrested.”

“Good!” Ron finally managed to articulate a word. “What he deserves! He’s a bloody murderer!”

“He is not!” Meghan shouted, then stopped, staring at the wolf. When she next spoke, it was with an obvious effort to keep herself under control. “My father never killed anyone. It was someone else, who made it look like it was him, but it wasn’t. He’s innocent. And he’s the reason we’ve always been hiding.”

“Where did you really live before you lived here?” Ginny asked.

“London. My mum was Aletha Freeman. She still is, really, but now she’s Aletha Freeman-Black.”

“My dad talks about her!” Ron said suddenly. “She worked for the Ministry, she’s a big mystery, ever since she disappeared a couple years ago – her and her... daughter...” He trailed off, looking at Meghan.

“We went to America,” Meghan said. “And then we changed our faces and names and came here.” She looked like she was going to cry. “I’m really sorry we had to lie to you. We never wanted to lie to anyone.”

“Who was the other person?” Luna asked. “The one who made it look like your father killed people?”

“His name is Peter Pettigrew. He can turn into a rat – that’s how he got away from the crime, by running away as a rat. His friends called him Wormtail because of that.”

Ginny frowned. Wormtail. Why does that sound familiar?

“So he could be hiding anywhere, as a rat,” Luna said. “Rats are small. They’re hard to find.”

“Percy’s got a rat for a pet,” Ginny pointed out. “His name’s Scabbers.”

“Mum says if Percy makes prefect, he can have an owl, and then I get Scabbers to take to Hogwarts,” Ron said, a little mechanically, as if his brain was still trying to digest all the information it had been given.

Ginny finally decided which question, out of the million or so swarming her brain, she wanted to ask first. “Harry.”

The wolf looked up at her.

“Do you really have a scar on your forehead?”

The wolf snorted as if laughing, got up, and came over to her. “He says to look and see,” Meghan said.

Ginny looked, and to her mingled astonishment and satisfaction, the wolf did indeed have a thin streak of white fur – such as might grow over scar tissue – on the front of his head, above and between his eyes, in the shape of a lightning bolt.

“Who are Mr. John and Mrs. Danger, really?” Luna asked.

“Their last name is Lupin. We call him Moony, but Danger is still Danger. Moony was really good friends with my dad at school. At Hogwarts.”

“Was he friends with – the rat – too?” Ginny asked.

Meghan nodded.

“Moony,” Ginny said slowly. “Wormtail.” She closed her eyes. “Padfoot.” She heard Meghan’s gasp and the fox’s yip. “And Prongs.” The wolf whined slightly.

She opened her eyes. “The twins have something made by four people named Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs. I don’t know what, but I know those names.”

“A map,” Meghan whispered. “A magic map of Hogwarts. They told us about it. Padfoot is my dad. Prongs was Harry’s. They were really good friends.”

“Until Harry’s dad died,” Luna said matter-of-factly.

The cat rubbed up against the wolf, purring.

“Hermione,” Ron said, looking at her. “Is she really Hermione?”

The cat walked over to him deliberately, looked him in the face, and gave him a very definite nod, punctuating it with a swat to his knee from the backside of her paw.

“I suppose that’s a yes, then,” Ron said weakly.

“Her real name is Hermione Granger,” Meghan added. “And her hair’s bushier. And she’s Danger’s sister, not her daughter. That’s the only difference.”

“What about Drake?” Ginny asked.

Luna stared at the fox. Ginny, looking sideways at her, saw her eyes do an odd sort of drifting thing, then come back into focus in a different way, as if she had been looking at her reflection in a window and was now looking through the glass. “His hair is a lighter color than it usually is,” she said dreamily. “Silvery. It’s handsome.” Her

eyes returned to normal. "He looks familiar. Like somebody I saw a picture of."

The fox looked back at Meghan. "Luna, has your father's magazine ever done an article on Draco Malfoy?" she asked.

Luna nodded. "Last year. Why – " She stopped and changed her focus again, staring hard at the fox, who stared hard back. She broke contact first. "You are Draco Malfoy," she said with certainty.

"He used to be," Meghan put in. "He changed his name when he came to live with us. He's Draco Black now."

Ron stared from the fox, to the wolf, to Meghan, and couldn't seem to speak at all.

"This is really, really weird," Ginny said feelingly.
You don't know the half of it, Harry commented.

Someone pounded on the door. "Ron! Ron, open up!"

"Percy," Ron gasped, coming back to life. "Harry – Neenie – Drake, or whatever your name is – hide!"

The animals scattered. Harry secreted himself behind the door as Ron pulled it open. "What's wrong?" he asked his brother.

"Have you heard the news?" Percy panted, one hand on his shoulder as if holding something there – Harry could see him through the hinges. "Sirius Black's been arrested!"

Meghan made a little moaning noise. Ginny went over to her and hugged her.

"I heard," Ron said.

Percy frowned. "You did? How? Dad's only just got home and told us."

“Er... I mean no, I didn’t hear. But now I did. What’s that?” Ron asked, pointing at the thing on Percy’s shoulder.

“Just Scabbers. Mum won’t let me have him out of his cage when your friends are here, so I thought I could let him have a little free time now, when they’re not.” Percy took his hand away.

Harry’s breath caught in his throat.

The rat on Percy’s shoulder looked... wrong.

Harry couldn’t say what it was. It wasn’t anything about his shape, or his size, or his color exactly, though color was closest. It was as if he had some kind of faint blueness to him, or greenness perhaps, some color that animals of his sort were not supposed to be. Or perhaps it was a sparkle, or maybe it wasn’t anything like that. He didn’t care. He knew what it meant.

The same sort of aura surrounded Draco and Hermione when he looked at them.

Percy’s rat was not a rat.

Percy’s rat was a human being.

Stay where you are! he commanded his siblings as he sensed them getting ready to charge out and look for themselves. If we can see him, he can see us. Meghan. Ask Percy how long he’s had the rat.

“Percy?” Meghan sounded very young, very unsure of herself. “Can I pet your rat?”

“All right.” Percy sounded pleased to be asked. Harry scrunched himself back as the door opened wider to allow Percy in, then watched as the tall boy crossed the room and handed the rat to Meghan, who stroked its fur with a trembling hand.

“How old is he?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Percy said, pressing a finger against his lips in thought. “He must be at least nine or ten, I’ve had him since I was five, and he was full grown when I found him.”

Since he was five, Draco said. He’s four years older than us, right?

Ron said he was going to be a prefect. That makes him a fifth year next year, and we’ll be first years. Yes, four years older, Hermione calculated rapidly.

Which means, when he was five, we were one, Harry said slowly, watching Percy pick up the rat again. And when I was one...

“Seek the one whose cry you hear,” Hermione recited. “For where she is, your prey is near.”

He’s our prey, Draco said, his voice half a snarl. That’s what it means. She sent us rat-hunting.

Harry felt his lips lift away from his teeth in something that could have been a growl or a grin – he was feeling savage and jubilant in equal measure. And we did it. We found him.

But what do we do now? Hermione asked.

“What’s going to happen to Sirius Black?” Meghan asked Percy as he put Scabbers back on his shoulder.

“Well, Dad says his trial’s been scheduled for tomorrow morning,” Percy said to the room at large. “I don’t know why they’re bothering to give him a trial, he should have been given the Dementor’s Kiss straight off, but apparently someone high up insisted on going through the formalities. Oh, and something odd – he wasn’t alone. There were other people arrested with him, three of them, a man and two women.”

Meghan’s lip trembled. “Are they in trouble too?”

“I’d assume so,” Percy said, a trifle patronizingly. “You don’t get arrested unless you’re guilty of something, after all. Well, I’ll go now, I just wanted to make sure you all knew, it’s important news, you know, history in the making...”

Ron closed the door behind him. “At least one thing hasn’t changed,” he said with an air of relief. “Percy’s still annoying.”

“That rat isn’t a rat,” Luna said.

Meghan threw her arms around Luna. “You saw it too!”

“Saw what?” Ginny asked.

“Percy’s rat is a man,” Luna said. “He’s not very tall, and kind of fat, and his hair is falling out. He looks nervous.”

“Wormtail,” Meghan said with a snarl in her own voice.

The other three cubs nodded.

Ron sat down hard on the floor.

Ginny was very pale. “We have to do something,” she said intensely. “They’re going to try the wrong man.”

“But what can we do?” Ron said blankly. “We’re just kids. Just a bunch of kids. Just seven kids.”

Seven, Harry said. Neenie – the poem – there was something about seven –

“Pack of seven, Pack-friends two, bring him unto justice true.” Pack of seven – but we’re the Pack now, and there’s only four of us –

I know, Harry said. And I think I know what that means. Meghan –

He explained what he needed her to say.

All right. I'll try.

Meghan got up. "Ron," she said, getting his attention. "Ginny, Luna... this is from everybody." She indicated Harry, Draco, and Hermione, who closed in behind her. "You've been our friends. You've been really great friends. Now we want to know if you want to be something more."

"What?" Ron asked almost suspiciously.

"We want you to be Pack with us."

"What does that mean?" Ginny asked.

"A Pack is like a family. It's people who swear to care for each other and watch out for each other always."

"Is your family a Pack?" asked Luna.

"Yes. We took an oath to each other. It joins us together. Will you take the oath with us, and be Pack with us?"

"What kind of oath?" asked Ron, who looked interested in spite of himself.

Meghan recited it.

"My hand in yours,

"My wand with yours,

"My life for yours,

"Now and always.

"You join hands and say it three times." Harry had instructed her to leave the part about the blood out, since they knew they weren't supposed to use knives and things by themselves, and they didn't

have any adults here with them to help them. "Will you be Pack with us? Please?"

"Yes," Luna said without fanfare.

Ginny stared at the ceiling, obviously thinking hard, then brought her head down and gave a quick nod. "Yes. I will."

Ron looked unsure.

Meghan, repeat after me, Hermione said quickly. Ron, you wanted to know what we could do...

"Ron, you wanted to know what we could do," Meghan said, pausing after each sentence to let Hermione finish. "This is what. If we're Pack, we can do anything together. We'll be strong. Much stronger than we are alone. Please. We need you."

"You need me?" Ron repeated. He looked from Hermione, to Draco, to Meghan, and finally settled on Harry. "You need me?"

Harry nodded. We really do. Pearl, tell him.

"Harry says we really need you, Ron," Meghan said. "Please?"

Ron hesitated one more second, then nodded. "All right."

They took the Pack-oath together, there in Ron's room, in a circle on the floor, holding hands and paws, and reciting the words together, aloud or silently, depending on their nature. There was no tingling this time, no feeling associated with the oath – they simply said it three times together, and after an awkward moment, released everyone's hands.

"Did it work?" Ginny asked. "I don't feel any different."

I don't think it works like that, Draco said.

Ginny jumped. "Who said that?"

Er, I did, Draco said hesitantly. Can you hear me?

“You can talk!” Ron blurted.

You can hear us! Hermione said excitedly. It must be the Pack-oath – it made us all like brothers and sisters, and now you can hear us too!

Well, that makes everything easier, Harry said. Meg won’t have to translate so much. Let’s get going. We have a rat to catch. Molly Weasley was in her bedroom, folding clothes, when there was a knock at the door. “Come in,” she called.

Meghan Black opened the door just wide enough to admit herself. “Hi, Mrs. Weasley,” she said shyly. “I just wanted to know where you were.”

Molly felt her heart melt. “Oh, you darling.” Impulsively, she walked over to Meghan and hugged her.

The girl hugged her back tightly. “Thank you,” she said, smiling up at Molly. “You’re a nice mum. Ron and Ginny are really lucky.”

“And you’re a flatterer,” Molly said, smiling in spite of herself. “Go on, now, shoo.”

Meghan slipped back out, closing the door behind her. Got it, Meghan called.

“Got what?” Ginny asked.

“A wand,” Luna said, with her tone implying “of course”.

Meghan arrived in the room, breathless and triumphant. “Here it is,” she said, holding it up.

Ron gawked. “That’s Mum’s!”

Meghan giggled. “I nicked it out of her pocket.”

Ron stared at her.

She only looks sweet and innocent, Harry said. I speak from experience. Go on, Meg, activate it.

Meghan bent over the tattered piece of parchment Draco had “borrowed” from the twins’ room and touched the wand to its center. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,” she said. Hagrid sat alone in his house, staring at the fire.

He checked the clock on the mantel. It was almost three o’clock. Two hours since he’d heard.

He’d been up at the castle for a late lunch, when Professor Flitwick had come running into the hall, utterly excited about something. “Sirius Black!” he’d squeaked out. “Sirius Black’s been arrested!”

Of course, everyone had wanted details. Flitwick had only known a few. But the few were enough to make Hagrid feel ill.

Sirius had been arrested at his home, along with another man and two women. No children had been found in the home. The four would be tried the next day, and if Sirius were convicted, he would surely be Kissed. Even if he could escape that, he would be back in Azkaban.

And he’d rather die than go back, Hagrid thought. Can’t say I blame him.

Someone pounded on his door.

“Comin’,” he called, getting up and grabbing Fang’s collar. “Back, Fang. Back.”

He opened the door to expose one person he’d never seen before – and one he had.

“Meghan!” He released Fang, who bounded at the tall boy accompanying her and began to lick him, and embraced the little girl, who was crying.

“I’m so happy to see you,” she explained, smiling at him through her tears. “Please, may we come in?”

“Oh, o’ course, o’ course,” Hagrid said, heartily embarrassed. He stepped aside, allowing them entrance.

“It’s my rat, sir,” the boy explained, putting a cage containing said animal on the table and pulling down the hood of his cloak to expose flaming red hair – a Weasley, then. And about Harry and Draco’s age, unless Hagrid missed his guess. “He hasn’t been sleeping well. Do you have something that could help him?”

Meghan handed Hagrid a small note, done in her childish handwriting, and pressed a finger to her lips. He read it over.

Please, give the rat something that will make him sleep for a whole day. We’ll explain afterwards.

“Righ’, then,” Hagrid said, going to his pantry. “I got just the thing.” He quickly mixed some of the knock-out potion he used when he needed to doctor one of the wild animals of the forest with some honey, then scooped up a rat-size dose on a spoon. “Bring him right over here, young feller – what’s yer name, anyway?”

“Ron, sir. Ron Weasley.”

“Ah, I’m no sir,” Hagrid said, offering the rat the spoon. It sniffed at the honey, then began to lick it up. “Jus’ Hagrid, tha’s what ev’ryone calls me.”

The rat finished the honey and began to clean its whiskers.

“Powerful stuff, that,” Hagrid said, watching the rat. “Should start working any – ah, there we go.”

The rat yawned. Ron quickly returned him to his cage. "There," he said, closing and latching it with an expression of grim satisfaction.

"Now?" Meghan asked, with an air of stifled excitement.

"Not yet," Ron said, staring at the rat. "Just another moment..."

The rat yawned again, then curled up in a heap and closed his eyes.

"Now," Ron said, nodding to Meghan.

Meghan turned to Hagrid. "He's not a rat," she said, her grin seeming too big to be contained on her tiny face. "Not really. He's Wormtail. We found him. We can save the Pack."

Hagrid gaped at her for a second. Then it sunk in.

Wormtail. Found. His friends were saved.

His yell of joy could probably have been heard all the way up at the castle.

Luna walked down the road toward the Den. Draco trotted beside her, almost invisible with the snow still thickly falling. The article about you was very interesting, she said.

What did it say?

It said your mother had sacrificed herself to convince a secret cult in the mountains of Wales to take you in.

Draco laughed. No secret cult. Just the Pack. But my mother did sacrifice herself. His voice lost all its humor. She died so no one could ever use her against me. So I would never have to wonder who I should be more loyal to, her or the Pack.

Luna pulled up her left sleeve and regarded her arm solemnly. I have a scar here, she said. Where the splinters of my mother's bowl hit me.

Draco looked. A crescent-shaped pattern of seven dots marked the inside of Luna's forearm. It's pretty, he said. Like a moon. Like your name.

Luna smiled at him. Here we are, she said, turning in at the gate of the Den. How are we going to get in?

There's a special latch on the ground. You step on it and the door opens. Draco began to dig where he knew the latch was covered by snow.

Why do you have that?

We just do, Draco said. Pack or no Pack, he wasn't about to tell Luna about Padfoot and Moony without their permission. Here it is. He pressed his paw down on the latch, hard, and the front door swung open.

They went inside quickly and shut the door behind them. The study is back this way, Draco said, leading the way. Moony keeps all the important papers in his desk. The password is...

"Katherine," Luna said to the desk, which obediently unlocked. She opened it and began to sort through the papers within.

Draco jumped up to the chair and put his front paws on the ledge. He sniffed. In there, he said, pointing with a paw. I can smell the blood.

Luna reached into the indicated cubbyhole and pulled out a scroll. This?

Open it.

Luna did.

That's it, Draco said, looking it over. I'm glad Neenie remembered about it.

She's good at remembering things, Luna said. I hope she has good things to remember about tomorrow.

I hope so too.

Girl and fox left the house, locking the door behind them. Minerva McGonagall was at her sister's house when an excited neighbor firecalled to tell the family about Sirius Black's arrest, and those of his friends. She had to pardon herself for a few minutes to regain her composure.

Dear God, is there no justice at all in the world? she raged, pacing the guest bedroom which was hers. Haven't they suffered enough?

It was then that she realized how attached she'd grown to the Pack.

An owl tapped at her bedroom window. She quickly opened it and let the bird in.

The letter was from Dumbledore, and was in his characteristic style – brief and to the point.

Minerva –

Be on the lookout for a communication from Hagrid, and if one should come, do what he desires of you. Do not despair. Our friends may yet be saved.

Albus

She read it three times over, then dried her eyes and went downstairs to rejoin her family.

The second owl arrived about an hour and a half later. The grandfather clock in the corner was just chiming three-thirty as the bird rapped on the windowpane.

“It's for you, Aunt Minerva,” said her niece Julia, stroking the owl's head feathers.

“Thank you,” Minerva said, accepting the letter. Julia had finished Hogwarts three years previously, with Severus Snape her bitter adversary every step of the way. I considered it practice for Harry Potter’s years there.

She broke the seal and began to read.

Professor –

Can you meet me at ten tomorrow in the Atrium at the Ministry?

Hagrid

That was all. No explanation, no postscripts, nothing.

Minerva found quill and ink. Yes, I will, she scribbled quickly, refolded and readdressed the parchment, and handed it back to the owl.

Hagrid appears to have learned a few things from Albus after all these years.

Specifically, how to be maddeningly obscure while he thinks he is being blindingly obvious.

The hours until ten tomorrow are going to seem very long indeed.
(A/N: And I’m sure the time until I update again will seem very long to all of you...

Chapter 42: “Debts and Deals”. So, if Danger’s soul isn’t in her body, where is it? And who, or what, is responsible for her dreams? Time to find out! Warning – absolutely horrible cliffhanger ending, which won’t be resolved until Chapter 44(!) :dances in ecstasy: I know the ending and you don’t, I know the ending and you don’t...)

Chapter 42: Debts and Deals

Danger awoke in light.

She lay in a patch of sunlight, on a smooth green lawn, by the edge of a very blue lake.

I know this place. I've been here before.

Or have I?

The place looked familiar, true, but as if she had seen a picture of it... a bad picture, dirty and discolored... and yet she knew she had been there, walked these grounds, skipped stones on this lake...

It's Hogwarts. The castle should be... over there. And as she sat up and looked around, there the castle was, indeed, rising majestically into a sky as blue as the water of the lake, its stones gleaming in the sunlight...

Wait a minute. Something's wrong here. It's the middle of winter. Why is everything green and sunny?

She stood up, and discovered a few other odd things. She was wearing white, a gown made of flowing, filmy material and trimmed with lace. Her shoes were soft slippers, also white. She reached up to her hair and found it unbound, but surprisingly soft and submissive to her hands. Usually it had a mind of its own, springing out of whatever she tried to curtail it with.

An idea came to her. She pressed her foot down hard on the ground.

It recoiled ever so slightly under the pressure.

That explains a lot.

The place was a dream. Or something similar to a dream. At any rate, she wasn't physically at Hogwarts, nor had she time-traveled into the middle of the summer.

“Wonder what I look like in this getup,” she murmured. “Wish I had a mirror.”

A full-length mirror materialized in front of her.

Of course. Dream rules. Get what you ask for. She scrutinized herself. Looks pretty good. I wonder what happens if I wish my hair blonde?

It abruptly was.

Danger studied her reflection. Nah, I look better brunette. She changed it back, then looked more closely at her face and frowned. Something's wrong there.

She started at the bottom. Chin, no. Lips, no. Cheeks, no. Eyes – yes. Something's the matter with my eyes...

But what it could be, she couldn't imagine. The same as ever, frank and brown, her reflection's eyes met hers in the mirror without shame or guilt...

Brown. All brown. No blue in them.

Remus!

Danger whirled away from the mirror, searching her mind. The place in it usually filled by the dryly humorous and reliable presence of her husband, her love, her best friend, was echoing, painfully empty.

No. This can't be happening.

But she knew it was.

The last part of the instructions. After they told me what to say to the cubs. “You will then leave your home and your people behind you and come to be judged. You will be allowed no communication with those you leave behind. They must undergo their testing separately, as you must undergo yours.”

And I never stopped to think that it included our connection...

God, he must be frantic, he'll think I'm dead, I have to go back...

A sound like a bark, from the grass near her feet, drew her attention.

A black-and-white creature looked up at her with sharp, intelligent, black eyes. When it saw that it had her attention, it began deliberately to walk in the direction of the castle.

“Do I follow you?”

The animal nodded.

“All right.” Danger vanished the mirror by willing it gone and followed the badger toward the castle. They had only gone a few yards before they were joined by another creature, this one long and thin and sinuous, who wound across their path in front of them and made Danger scream before she realized what it was.

“I’m sorry...” She pressed a hand to her racing heart and laughed weakly. “I wasn’t expecting you. But I should have been, shouldn’t I?”

The snake nodded, making a sound which Danger was sure Harry would have said was laughter. It fell into step (or slither) beside her.

She was more prepared for the scream which echoed out of the sky above her, and lifted her arm to receive the great bird quite calmly. “Oh, you are a beauty,” she said admiringly, stroking the eagle’s plumage. “And not nearly as heavy as I would have expected. But I suppose that’s more of the dream working.”

The bird bobbed its head yes.

As they approached the castle, Danger was, by now, completely unsurprised to see the majestic form which rose up to meet them. She bowed slightly, and was gratified when the big cat bowed back.

Escorted by lion, eagle, badger, and serpent, she ascended the steps of Hogwarts and passed through the great doors, which opened before her and closed behind her, like magic.

Which is, of course, what it is.

They entered the empty Great Hall. Danger glanced up, as she always did, to see the enchanted ceiling, today so incredibly blue, with the occasional fluffy white cloud scudding past.

Everything's so bright, so clear and crisp. Usually dreams are less real than reality.

The eagle took wing, circling the Hall once, then folded its wings and swooped down, past Danger, who dodged almost involuntarily, and through a small door to one side of the teachers' dais. The badger and the snake followed it in.

"I go in there?" she asked the lion, who nodded solemnly.

She took a deep breath and stepped forward, towards the chamber. One step. Two. Three.

She could see inside now. There were people in there. Men and women both, dressed in bright colors.

Four. Five. Six.

They were all waiting for something – for her...

Seven. Eight. Nine.

Oh God, don't let me pass out now...

Ten. She was inside.

Three walls of the small room were lined with chairs – three to her left, three to her right, and four directly in front of her. Every chair was occupied, and every occupant was looking closely at her.

Am I blushing? I have to be blushing. I know I'm blushing, I can feel it...

“Gertrude Kelly Granger, daughter of David, daughter of Rose, we bid you welcome,” said a man who sat almost directly in front of her, rising.

He looked rather like an old lion. There were streaks of grey in his mane of tawny hair and his bushy eyebrows; he had keen yellowish eyes behind a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles and (she noticed as he came forward and bowed to her) a certain rangy, loping grace even though he walked with a slight limp. His robes were red and fit him well, looking neither new enough to be uncomfortable nor old enough to be shabby.

She curtsied to him. “I thank you, good sir,” she said, feeling the language of Sirius’ period stories coming almost naturally to her after six years of proofreading them for him. “You seem to know quite well who I am. May I in return know who you are, and why you have called me here?”

It was not quite a demand. The man smiled as a ripple went through the room, the sounds of people murmuring to their neighbors or readjusting themselves in their seats. “Direct – one might even say blunt – yet polite. Both are valued among us. You may know these things. Will you sit?” His wave created a chair behind her.

“I will.” No sense standing all day. She seated herself and, under pretense of adjusting her skirts, had a good look around the room.

Besides the man who had spoken to her, there were two others dressed in red, another man, somewhat younger, and a woman, who both shared the tawny hair of the older man. The man reminded her slightly of Sirius – he had the same look of being relaxed, no matter what posture he was in. The woman redoubled her feeling of familiarity, for she had Aletha’s regal bearing and poise.

They sat next to a veritable gaggle of women in blue, all of whom were probably somehow related, if one could judge by their faces.

The oldest of them, if her snow-white hair was any indicator, wore a soothing azure. The others ranged from a frail-seeming blonde woman in the palest and softest sky-blue imaginable, through a redhead in the homey color of faded blue jeans, into a dark-haired woman in stern but not unapproachable navy.

On the opposite wall sat a young man and an older woman, both brown-haired (though the woman's was turning silver in places) and wearing a sunny yellow. They looked like people one could confide in, people whose word was their bond, and as Danger looked more closely, she spotted flecks of dirt under the woman's fingernails, and a small greenish stain on the man's right hand.

A black-haired man, no longer quite young but certainly not old, sat beside them, unique in his robes of grass-green. His face was confident and appraising, and he was the only one of the ten to have noticed that she was looking at them. His eyes, green as his robes, met hers frankly, and she blushed again and sat up quickly, facing the man in red who had spoken to her.

"You wished to know who we are, and what our business may be with you," he said, and Danger thought suddenly of Sirius and Narcissa, using formal speech to make a difficult matter easier to handle. "You know of three of us already."

He indicated himself, the white-haired woman in blue, and the older woman in yellow, both of whom rose and came to stand beside him, blue, red, and yellow somehow harmonizing rather than clashing.

"We are the Founders of Hogwarts."

Danger closed her mouth quickly, before she drooled on her dress. "But..." she managed to articulate.

"Let me guess," said the woman in yellow, who was surely Helga Hufflepuff. "We're dead."

Danger nodded weakly.

“We did die, it is true,” said the other woman – Rowena Ravenclaw, she must be. “But after our deaths, we chose – ”

“We were chosen,” Hufflepuff interrupted.

“We accepted being chosen,” the man corrected further – the man who must, she realized, be Godric Gryffindor. “To remain close to the world we once dwelt in, and help to direct its day-to-day activities.”

“These others are our children,” Ravenclaw said, gesturing behind her at the three seated women – her daughters, Danger recalled. “They too were offered this choice, and one and all they joined us in it.”

Danger turned to look at the man in green. He rose. “I am, as you may have guessed, the so-called ‘good’ son of Salazar Slytherin,” he said with a trace of irony in his voice. “He and my brother Matthias quarreled with the other Founders about the subject of purity of blood – the story has survived to your day, I believe.”

“It has,” Danger said, surprised by the steadiness of her voice. “What has not survived is your name. If I may make so bold as to ask.”

“Alexander. I alone, from the three Slytherin men who swore the oath, remain true to my given word. My father and brother broke their vows and deserted our company, and now they will never find rest, by day or by night, in life or in death.” It had the sound of a ritual speech to it.

Abruptly Danger realized where she had heard it before. “The oath – you have sworn an oath to one another – ”

“My hand in yours,” Gryffindor said, extending his hands to the man and woman in red, who must be his son and daughter.

“My wand with yours,” the rest of the company joined in, with Alexander and the darkest Ravenclaw daughter lifting their hands to one another, since they could not reach to hold them.

“My life for yours.” The line seemed to hold a bitter double meaning for Alexander, as his face twisted into a wry smile.

“Now and always.” The words rang in the chamber, seeming to echo far past the point they should have.

“None who have not sworn this oath may enter this castle,” Gryffindor said, looking back at Danger. “We, the four Founders, so swore to one another before embarking upon our great task – the building of a school of magic. These, our children, so swore to one another and to us when they were of age and could choose to do so or not. May I make known to you my son, Paul, and my daughter, Maura.”

Danger returned their half-bows.

“May I make known to you my son, Adam,” said Hufflepuff, and Danger bowed to him as well.

“My daughters,” Ravenclaw said, and each rose and curtsied as her mother spoke her name. “Sophia.” The frail-seeming blonde. “Brenna.” The dark-haired woman. “Margaret.” The redhead.

“I’m still amazed that I was allowed to be part of this,” Margaret said frankly, remaining standing where her sisters had sat down. “You may not know this, but I was a Squib. No magic at all. I married a Muggle, and none of our children turned out magic. I’ve always wondered if any of my later descendants did. You wouldn’t know, would you?”

Danger shook her head regretfully. “They say the records from your time are inconsistent,” she said. “So no one can even tell if there are any descendants left, from any of the Founders, much less sort out who’s descended from whom.”

“Well, there’s one sure way to tell,” Paul Gryffindor said. “The family talents.” He snapped his fingers, and was abruptly holding a handful of fire. “Know anyone who can do this?”

“Paul!” Maura Gryffindor snapped. “Forgive my brother,” she said to Danger. “He’s still not entirely housetrained, even after all these years.”

“I wish Salazar and Matthias hadn’t left,” Adam Hufflepuff said ruefully, looking around the room. “Without them, we’re outnumbered.”

“If we could return to the subject at hand,” Gryffindor said, in a mild-seeming voice that nonetheless cut through the indignant feminine chatter at Adam’s remark. “We are now known to one another, Gertrude Granger. We shall address the second half of your question. Our business with you.”

Danger sat up straighter.

“You must know that you are unique among witches and wizards. You have talents seldom, if ever, seen before. Your ability to tell the future or see the truth of the present or past in your dreams. Your ability to ‘tame’ a werewolf at his time of change, with the related mind connection between you and him. And your ability to do one otherwise impossible act which must be accomplished to save one whom you love.”

“I do know this,” Danger answered warily.

“We are responsible for these abilities.”

The chamber was utterly silent. The lion, which lay beside Danger, lifted its head at the unusual lack of sound. The eagle, perched on the back of her chair, mantled its wings uneasily. The badger stirred beneath her, and the snake wound its way up the leg and onto the arm of the chair.

Automatically, Danger stroked the smooth scales. She was still trying to comprehend what Gryffindor had said to her. Responsible for my abilities? But I got my magic when...

“Does this mean that you are responsible for the deaths of my parents?” she asked in a deadly quiet voice.

“No.” She had never heard something so definitely negated in her life. “We were not. Your magic, awakened by that most unfortunate happening, was wild and without form. We gave it form and definition. That is all.”

Some of Danger’s tension left her. But not all, by a long shot. So why are they telling me this?

“I suppose I should thank you,” she said tentatively. “You made my life, as it is, possible. I would probably never have started babysitting Harry if I hadn’t recognized him from my dreams. I would certainly never have met Remus. Sirius would still be in Azkaban – Draco would still be a Malfoy – Meghan wouldn’t even exist – and I don’t know what Aletha would have done. So thank you. From all of us.”

“Your thanks are received and appreciated,” Gryffindor said, with what looked like an approving smile. “And in recompense, we will show you something you have long wanted to see.”

He gestured, and an area of the air before her turned opaque, first black, then silver, like a mirror. An image came into being there – the kitchen of the Burrow, Danger realized after a confused moment.

“Mum!” she heard a girl’s voice shout. Ginny. “Mum, where are you?”

“I’m in the living room,” Molly Weasley’s voice answered. “Why?”

“I want to show you something!” Ginny came hurtling down the stairs, closely followed by a half-grown, dark grey wolf and a kitten on the verge of being called cat, a lighter shade of grey than the wolf. “Look, they do tricks!”

The scene froze. “Do you know them?” Ravenclaw asked gently.

“Who? The girl? I know her, she’s our neighbor...”

“The animals,” Hufflepuff said. “Do you recognize your own work?”

“My work?” Danger looked again at the creatures, frozen in their places. “Does this thing move around? I mean, the scene? Can I see it from another angle?”

“Of course,” Gryffindor said. “Direct it with your mind.”

I want to see the wolf’s face, Danger thought towards the viewer, which obediently angled around to give her a look.

One look was all she needed. There was no mistaking those eyes.

“Harry,” she said flatly. “And that would make the kitten Hermione – it’s Remus’ name for her, I should have realized – and is there a fox with them, by any chance?”

“How interesting that you should ask that,” Ravenclaw said with a smile as the scene reanimated and Ginny charged through the kitchen, wolf and cat in tow.

“Watch, they play chase, and then they turn around and do it the other way,” Ginny was saying excitedly. “And then the cat rides on the wolf...”

Another person came cautiously down the stairs, peering around. “Meghan,” Danger said in relief. “She made it all right.”

Meghan turned and waved at someone up the stairs. Luna Lovegood and a small white fox appeared, hurrying across the kitchen and to the outer door, stopping only long enough for Luna to don cloak and boots before exiting the house. “And that’s Draco,” Danger said, shaking her head in disbelief. “Lord, when I do magic, I really do magic, don’t I?”

Ron Weasley was the next into the kitchen. He carried a wooden cage. Inside the cage was something small and gray and furry...

“Is that a rat?” Danger asked cautiously.

“Yes,” Gryffindor said in a strange voice. Danger paused the scene and looked up at him. He looked... not angry, not quite, she thought. Possibly... annoyed? Put out?

“Have I done something?”

“No, not at all. It’s what you didn’t do.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Do you remember the first dream you ever had?” Hufflepuff asked.

“My first true-dream? The poem? I think so. ‘Black to red and red to brown shall truly bring the darkness down. Find the red and find the rat whose cunning plot...’ ”

Danger stopped and looked back at the viewer.

"Find the red." And we thought it might mean red hair. And then we didn’t think about it any more. Not even when we moved practically next door to a notoriously red-haired family...

“How stupid should I be feeling right now?” she asked in a small voice.

“Very,” Gryffindor said in thunderous tones that would have been much more impressive if Danger hadn’t had the impression he was trying not to laugh. “Three years – three years – you’ve been living practically on top of the man...”

“There’s a prohibition on us telling you things more than once in your dreams,” Ravenclaw said. “So we couldn’t remind you of it. Luckily for you, your cubs are quite perceptive.”

Danger restarted the scene. Ron handed the cage to Meghan, reached up onto the mantelpiece for a flowerpot, and removed two

handfuls of glittering powder from it. He threw one handful directly into the fire, turning the flames green. "Hogwarts kitchens," Meghan said in hushed tones as she stepped into the fire, and the flames whirled her out of sight.

Ron pulled a tattered piece of parchment from his pocket and studied it. After a moment, he nodded in satisfaction, tucked it away again, and tossed in his own handful of Floo powder. "Hogwarts kitchens," he said, and disappeared in the green flames.

"They seek your friend Hagrid," Hufflepuff said as the viewer vanished. "He will help them. They plan to present the rat as evidence at the trial tomorrow."

"Sirius' trial is tomorrow?" Danger said, coming back to her present reality with a jump. "I have to get back – they'll need me – "

"That need may go unfulfilled," Ravenclaw said, a trifle frostily, Danger thought.

"What? Why?"

"As has been stated, the present form of your magic owes its life to us," Hufflepuff said. "But there is another debt owing between us. On the night of April 12, 1982, you and your husband invoked a curse upon a pair of Muggles. Do you recall doing so?"

Danger didn't even have to think about it. "Yes, of course – the night we rescued Harry, the night we cursed the Dursleys – "

"The Threefold Curse of the Righteous," Gryffindor said. "And it took its desired effect. It is an immensely powerful piece of magic. Did it ever cross your mind that some recompense might be required?"

"Recompense?" Danger repeated blankly.

"It's quite a job, fouling up someone's life that consistently," said Sophia Ravenclaw. "And doing it so they don't realize they've been

cursed – that takes finesse. We've had to spend an awful lot of time on those two over the past several years. You do owe us."

Danger stared at the blonde woman, an awful fear growing in her. "What, exactly, do I owe you?"

"You mean, in what coin can you pay us back?" asked Brenna, the darkest of the Ravenclaw sisters.

Danger nodded.

"Oh, I don't know. A lifetime of service, perhaps." Brenna smiled at Danger's astounded face. "You knit, I understand."

"Yes."

"Then you're used to handling yarn and thread. You could help me with my spinning."

"Spinning." Danger looked at Sophia and Margaret. "Which of you measures and which one cuts?"

"I measure," Sophia said with an approving smile. "Margaret cuts. And I see someone knows her mythology."

"This is beside the point," Gryffindor said. "The point is, you do owe us a great deal, Madame Granger. Brenna is quite accurate – you invoked the Curse to last for the lives of its victims, so I would say you owe us your own life in recompense."

"You wouldn't die, of course," Alexander put in, leaning forward. "You'd simply live out your life here. It's a very pleasant place, nothing to harm you or frighten you, and work that truly means something. And when you die, if you've done well, you might be offered the choice to remain among us – you have sworn the oath, after all, even if you didn't quite understand what it meant at the time."

Danger swallowed hard against a feeling of impending panic. I have to think. I have to think.

What can I possibly offer them instead of my life?

“What if I asked you to lift the Curse?” she said in desperation, looking at Gryffindor. “Would that affect how much I owe you?”

“It might,” Gryffindor said slowly. “It might. Would you ask this?”

“I would. Even if it does not affect my debt.” Danger spoke at a measured pace, giving her racing thoughts time to collect themselves. “The Curse has been in effect on Vernon and Petunia Dursley for nearly nine years. That is at least ten times as long as my Pack-son suffered under their care. It is enough, and past enough. I do ask that the Curse be lifted from them. So I speak, so I intend.”

“And so it shall be done,” Gryffindor said, looking thoughtful.

“Madame Granger, you place us in a dilemma,” Hufflepuff said with a wry smile. “The fact is that with the Curse gone, your debt is diminished by a significant amount. By almost half, in fact.”

“But half of it remains,” Maura Gryffindor said. “And that half must be paid.”

“So we offer you a choice,” Ravenclaw said smoothly. “This choice. Listen well. You may return to your world and your people, bereft of those unusual talents of magic which were spoken of earlier – your dreams, your wild abilities, and your, what do you call it, your werewolf taming. You will, of course, retain the common magical power which is used by all wand-wielders. You will live out your life with no further intervention from us beyond that which is normal to the lives of all those who have magic in the land of Britain.”

“Or,” Hufflepuff said, “you could stay here, and send your magic back.”

Danger stared at the yellow-robed woman. “I don’t understand.”

“Your dreams warn your family, your Pack, of danger – no pun intended, dear – do they not? If you choose to send your magic back, they will always be warned of approaching peril in time to avoid or deflect it. Your wild magic holds them safe against unexpected disasters – something will always happen to avert those disasters from them. And your werewolf taming – well, that’s easy. Your Remus will simply no longer be a werewolf.”

“If you chose this course, your Pack-brother’s name would be cleared right away,” Paul said. “He and the rest of your Pack would be home and safe tonight.”

“Your cubs would grow happy and healthy,” Maura said.

“Your friends would prosper, and grow in friendship for one another,” said Adam.

“Their children would be many,” said Brenna.

“Their lives would be long,” Sophia said.

“Their deaths would be painless,” said Margaret.

“And they wouldn’t miss you,” said Alexander quietly. “No one would grieve for you. They would either know you were somewhere better, or simply forget about you altogether.”

“So the choice lies before you now,” Gryffindor concluded. “To give up either your life, or your magic. The decision is yours, and yours alone, to make.”

“May I have some time to think?” Danger asked in a voice she hardly recognized as her own.

“Of course. All the time you wish.”

“And... may I be alone for it?”

“You may.” Gryffindor clapped his hands once. Danger was abruptly outside, by the lake again, seated on a boulder instead of the chair.

She stared out over the lake, shivering, although the day was warm.

My life, or my magic.

Go back, and watch my love’s pain every month – or stay, and know that he will never hurt again.

Go back, and fight for my brother’s freedom – or stay, and by that action make him free.

Go back, and dry my sister’s tears – or stay, and ensure she never sheds them.

Go back, and battle over the custody of the cubs – or stay, and know they are safe and happy with the rest of the Pack.

She rose, pressing her lips together to deny herself tears.

I know what I must do. What I want must play no part.

As she turned, she found herself again in the chamber of the Founders.

“Have you reached a decision?” Gryffindor asked.

Danger looked him in the eye. “I have.”

(A/N: Don’t say I didn’t warn you. And you should all have recognized the description of Gryffindor – it’s not mine, it belongs to someone we all revere... And I am also indebted to Madeline L’Engle and her book *Many Waters* for the “chosen, been chosen, accepted being chosen” dialogue.

A shoutout goes to glm, my one-thousandth reviewer! Whenever you get here, I love you and I’m thinking of you as I post this!

So, how much do you all hate me now? And how crazy will you go before Chapter 43, "Do You Trust Me?" comes out? And how many reviews will you give me to make sure that's soon?)

Chapter 43: Do You Trust Me?

Andromeda had little trouble getting permission to talk with Aletha and Sirius. The Auror in charge at the holding cells was a woman with hair by now almost entirely silver, but streaks of its original blonde remained. And she remembered the Healer.

“I was on duty the night you came to see your sister,” she said, extending her hand to Andromeda. “Leticia Halcyon. Let to my friends.”

“Andromeda Tonks. Andy.”

Auror Halcyon took a scroll out of her desk and dipped her quill. “So – nothing personal, I have to ask, it’s for the record – why do you want to see them?”

“Well, then, for the record, Mr. Lupin asked me to look in on them, to make sure they’re all right. Will that do?”

“Certainly.” Auror Halcyon made a notation on her scroll, then looked back up at Andy. “The record is now complete,” she said, letting her sentence end on an upward note.

Andy tapped her finger against her lips, thinking hard about what to say and what to leave out. “Sirius is my cousin, and I haven’t seen him for a long time – obviously. I always liked him, and Aletha – I knew her, they were more or less together before... everything happened, so we’d met several times. I want to make sure they’re all right.”

“So, more or less, you put the truth on record.” Halcyon nodded. “I like that. Keeps everything square. Say... Tonks. We’ve got a prospective applicant with that name. First name Nympha... something.”

“Nymphadora.” Andy smiled. “My daughter. She’ll be leaving Hogwarts this June.”

“Well, her O.W.L.s look good. If she passes her N.E.W.T.s and her aptitude tests, we’ll be glad to have her. Now, as to your request. I think it can be honored. After all, what can they do to you – you’re the one with the wand.”

Andy smiled. “True enough.”

“Which one would you like to see first?”

“Aletha – Ms. Freeman, that is.”

Halcyon pursed her lips, perusing her scroll. “Hm. Says here she claims to be Freeman-Black now.”

“Yes, Remus did mention they were married. It must have been a Muggle wedding.” Andy frowned. “Are those even legal under magical law?”

“I certainly hope so,” said Halcyon with a touch of heat. “I wouldn’t want to be considered a bastard.”

Andy covered her mouth, chagrined at her faux pas. “I’m so sorry.”

“You didn’t know,” Halcyon said with a shrug. “And it hardly matters. To anyone except pure-blood fools. May they all go the way of that one you Stunned back in ’84.”

“Amen,” Andromeda said heartily. Then she remembered. “Oh, I need to ask about something else. What’s your policy on housing more than one person in the same cell?”

Halcyon grimaced. “Strictly, absolutely, completely not to be done. And I can’t do a thing about it. You’d have to talk to the higher-ups to get permission, and they’re not likely to be in, it’s two days to Christmas and a Sunday, after all...”

Andromeda winced. “Are you sure you can’t bend the rules?”

Halcyon shook her head regretfully. "I'm sorry, but it could mean my job." She looked at Andy. "Tell you what. About how long do you expect to take with these talks?"

"About an hour."

"I'll go upstairs while you're doing that and see if there's anyone around who does have authority to bend the rules a little."

"Thank you," Andromeda said with true feeling. "You have no idea what it would mean to them. Where can I find Letha?"

"Straight down this hall to the end, turn right. You can't miss her, she's the only one along there. When you're ready to see Black, just come back the way you came – first left and all the way to the end of the hall, that's here. Then take a right, go all the way to the end of that hall, and take another right. Got it?" Halcyon's tone was neither condescending nor patronizing, simply brisk.

"Got it," Andy said with a thankful smile. "I'll be back."

"I certainly hope so."

Andy stopped before she got to Sirius' cell and tried to collect her wits. Talking with Letha had been easy. Almost too easy. She had gone overtime with it, it was 3:30 already. She was going to have to make this snappy.

Think, girl. Letha says you can trust him. Remus never even said it, it was just obvious to him. Draco's happy with him. All their children – their cubs – are. I saw it myself. So how bad can he be?

Just treat him like your crazy little cousin, the one who used to put pixies in your bed.

She cracked a smile. Shouldn't be too hard. He is the crazy little cousin who used to put pixies in my bed.

She walked up to his cell and stopped. He was sitting with his head in his hands, but looked up at her, obviously surprised.

“You,” she said, “are serious trouble.”

“No, ma’am,” he said solemnly. “I’m Sirius Black.”

They both laughed.

“I don’t believe you remembered that,” Sirius said with the same utterly charming smile she remembered, possibly a touch more so with the added years of age and experience. “How long has it been since we did that? Nine, ten years?”

“At least.” Andromeda debated conjuring a chair, as she had done at Letha’s cell, and finally decided to sit on the floor, prompting Sirius to do the same. “How are you?” she asked, looking straight at him.

Sirius took his time about answering, looking speculatively around him. “I’ve been better,” he answered finally. “But I’ve also been worse. Azkaban comes to mind.”

“I would imagine.”

“Not if you can help it, you wouldn’t,” Sirius said very quietly. “Trust me on this. You don’t want to.”

“I trust you.”

Sirius looked interested. “Really?”

“I’ve been talking to Remus and Letha.”

“How are they?” Sirius asked quickly. “And have you seen Danger? Remus’ wife, not very tall, brown bushy hair, unconscious – unless she woke up in the last couple of hours?”

“From the end – no, she hasn’t, yes, I’ve seen her, and before you ask, I don’t know what’s wrong with her.”

Sirius sighed. "I was afraid you'd say that. It's hard not knowing. I really care about her. Not in a way that would make Letha worry, you understand."

"As a sister. And Remus as a brother."

"Exactly."

"Letha said the same. She's more or less all right – she cried some when we talked about your cubs."

"I don't blame her. I feel like crying myself." Sirius closed his eyes for a moment. "You probably got into this with her," he said a trifle shakily. "Or with Remus. But we love those four like nothing else. They're our reason for living – our reason for existing, in a very real way."

"Go on," Andy said, leaning forward slightly.

"If it hadn't been for Harry, there wouldn't be a Pack," Sirius explained. "Legally, he belongs to me, but I was in no shape to take care of him when I got out of Azkaban, and Letha couldn't just quit her job. Besides, I wasn't about to shut Moony and Danger out of his life. So we stayed together so he could have all of us, and it wasn't long before Hermione had all our hearts too. And then Meghan, when she came along, and finally Draco. Somewhere along the line we realized we liked living together, we liked the companionship and the camaraderie – but we never would have thought to try it if it hadn't been for Harry."

"I'm sure he's all right," Andy said impulsively. "I'm sure all of them are."

"If Bossy Andy says it, it must be true," Sirius chanted, flashing her a one-sided grin. It faded quickly. "How's Remus?"

"Worried," Andromeda said. "Worried about you and Aletha, worried about your cubs, but most of all worried about Danger."

“I’m not surprised. They’re very close.”

Andy decided to fish a little. “He mentioned something I didn’t quite understand. Something about sensing each other’s presence...”

“They do have a sort of link between them,” Sirius said cautiously. “Either of them knows what the other one is thinking or feeling at any given moment.”

“Like telepathy.”

“I suppose. But when Danger – fell – the link was broken. They haven’t been out of touch that way for quite a long time. I think it scared Remus pretty badly. He’s always been very much afraid of losing her.”

“He never had anyone, before,” Andy said thoughtfully. “I don’t ever remember him even going out on a date – you used to tease him about it.”

“He was always shy socially, because of his condition. I think he was afraid of getting close to someone, because eventually he’d have to tell her, and more likely than not, she’d leave him. It’s only common sense if you’ve grown up magical, after all. Werewolves are scary, bad, and dangerous.”

Andy couldn’t keep from smiling at the childish tone he put on for the last few words. “This Danger of his didn’t grow up magical, I take it.”

“She was a Muggle until she was twenty,” Sirius explained. “She had latent magic. Brought out by a bad shock. Her parents’ deaths.”

Andromeda’s breath caught. Bad enough to lose one parent at a time – but Sirius had specifically said deaths. “Both of them?”

“Killed by Death Eaters,” he confirmed. “Only she didn’t know that, then.”

Andromeda shook her head, speechless. Then she remembered why she was there, checked her watch, and swore softly. She was already overdue. "Sirius – Remus asked for you. You and Letha both. He wants you nearby. And I told him I would talk to someone in charge about it, and that I'd be back in an hour, and – "

"Talk to someone in charge?" Sirius repeated. "Good luck. The way this place is structured, you'd have more luck kicking down a brick wall."

Andromeda hissed between her teeth in annoyance. "That was the impression I got."

"It would take something drastic for them to move us all in together," Sirius said. "Some kind of crisis, something they couldn't ignore or paperwork away." He stopped, looking at her. His lips moved silently, as if he were reciting something to himself.

"Is something wrong?" Andy asked.

Sirius had been sitting cross-legged. Now he slid his legs out straight in front of him. "Not really," he said quietly, turning to one side, then the other, obviously stretching his back. "I did have an idea, though."

"An idea," Andy repeated in the same quiet tones he was using. "What kind of idea?"

Sirius got onto his knees and rolled his shoulders, then scooted himself a little closer to the bars. "Andy – do you trust me?"

"Well, that's the million-Galleon question, now, isn't it," Andromeda said half-jokingly. "Why are you asking?"

"I can't tell you." He looked straight into her eyes. "But please believe me when I say this. I would never hurt you. I don't want to hurt anyone. With the exception of Peter Pettigrew and a few other idiots with snakes branded on their arms. I never killed anyone, and I never broke my word to Lily and James. Harry is happy and well, exactly the way they would have loved to see him."

He paused, as if constructing a thought carefully. "You're acting as if you want to help us. And I think I know how you can. But you have to trust me. Really trust me, not just say you do. Do you trust me, Andy?"

Andromeda looked at her cousin, the infamous murderer, the most notorious criminal in Britain.

Letha's husband. Remus' brother. Draco's father.

"Yes."

"Then come closer."

Andromeda stared at him for a moment, then nodded slowly. "All right."

Casually, she patted the pocket in which she kept her wand.

"Healer Tonks?" Leticia Halcyon called, stepping out of the fire. "You around?"

A woman screamed.

Let was running before the echoes had a chance to die. Something happened, I knew it, I knew I shouldn't have gone...

Other feet were hitting the floor behind hers, reminding her painfully of who she was in the presence of. And now I look bad in front of the Head of the Department...

She had been lucky, or so she'd thought at the time. Amelia Bones had come in at Albus Dumbledore's request, to meet with him about the trial for the next day, and she'd caught Madam Bones on her way out the door after that meeting was over. Bones had agreed to come and listen to what the Healer had to say, but Let knew it was likely to be a lost cause – Bones was a stickler for the rules...

She turned the corner and stopped, aghast.

Andromeda Tonks sat with her back against the bars of Sirius Black's cell, her eyes filled with fear. The reason why was immediately apparent. Black had his left arm through the bars and around her chest, and what Let assumed was Tonks' own wand pointed at her throat with his other hand.

"One word," he growled. "One word and she's screaming. Two and she's dead. That's all it takes."

"What do you want?" Bones demanded.

"I want my friends," Black said harshly. "I want them in here with me. Now."

"You're out of your mind," Let said decisively. "Ma'am, his one friend's a werewolf," she said, turning to Bones. "Moonrise is any minute now, they'd all die."

"So maybe we've all got death wishes," said Black, smiling humorlessly. "Do it. Now."

"Please," Tonks said in a frightened squeak of a voice. "Do what he says."

Dammit. Hostage situations never turn out well. "Ma'am?" Let said unsurely.

"How many people are we talking about?" Bones asked, still watching Black.

"Three others, ma'am. Two women – one of them unconscious – and a man. He's the werewolf."

"This doesn't make sense, boy," Bones said to Black. "Why threaten her life to endanger your own?"

“I have my reasons,” Black said roughly. “Are you going to do it or aren’t you?”

Bones nodded very slowly. “I’ll do it. But on one condition. I want some more security here first. Just in case your friends try something before they get in there with you.”

“They won’t. But if you insist, all right. As long as you make it fast. You, Auror,” Black snapped at her. “What time is it?”

Let checked her watch. “3:42.”

“You have five minutes,” Black told Bones. “Then I’ll start finding interesting ways to make her scream.”

“Halcyon,” Bones said without taking her eyes off Black. “Shacklebolt should still be in his cubicle. Get him and anyone else who’s around. Get them back here as fast as you can.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Let took off running again.

Oh God, what if she gets hurt because of me – I let her in, I didn’t go with her, it’s my fault, my fault, and she has a daughter, a family...

It was all the incentive she needed to get the job done, and fast. At 3:46, Aletha looked up, startled, as her cell door opened. “Come on,” said a compact man, waving at her. “Out you come. You’re being moved.”

I’m being moved. What a nice way to put it. As if I were a thing.

But she came, and walked docilely enough down the hallways at the point of his wand, turning where he told her to and resisting her very strong urge to ask him what the hell exactly he thought she was going to do.

Then she rounded the final corner and froze.

Oh. My. God.

Sirius was holding a wand on Andromeda and staring down Amelia Bones.

“Move,” growled the man, poking her with his own wand. “In there.” He indicated the door of Sirius’ cell, which Aletha now saw was open. And – was there someone lying on the bed?

She moved forward a few paces, and saw that there was –

– and it was someone with brown frizzy hair –

She didn’t remember going the rest of the way into the cell, didn’t remember passing behind Sirius, didn’t remember anything until she was kneeling beside the bed, holding Danger’s hand in hers.

Her friend didn’t move, didn’t stir. But her pulse was beating, and her chest rose and fell – but slowly, so slowly.

We’re together again. But at what price?

She forced herself to keep looking at Danger, not to look at Sirius, not to see the expression of savagery and – could it be – glee on his face at having Andromeda at his mercy.

I told her she could trust him. She trusted him on my word.

And he betrayed her trust.

He betrayed mine.

A horribly familiar sensation began to creep over her. She recognized it with dread.

I never thought I would feel this way again.

It was the mixture of confusion, sorrow, and disorientation she had felt, in one measure or another, through the end of 1981 and the

beginning of 1982. It had ended, abruptly, one March morning in the kitchen of a house in Surrey.

And now it's back.

Because now he is everything I thought he was. A killer. A torturer.

An oathbreaker.

"Where's the other one?" Sirius growled. It didn't even sound like his voice. She was having trouble breathing, she thought she might pass out...

The other one?

Oh my God... he means Remus.

We're going to be locked in here with an untamed werewolf.

Sirius really has lost his mind.

She stared at her Pack-sister's relaxed face. Oh, Danger, if we ever needed you, it's now...

Slow footsteps caught her attention.

Remus came into view, walking slowly and with a pronounced limp. The expression on his face was highly controlled. He took in the tableau in front of the cell without flinching.

"In there," said Kingsley Shacklebolt's deep voice, and the man himself appeared behind Remus. He prodded Remus on the shoulder with his wand, not rudely as Aletha's Auror had done, but almost as a friendly gesture. "Go on, inside."

Remus looked straight at Sirius. "This is a very bad idea," he said calmly.

"I know."

“You’re going to regret it a lot.”

“I know.”

“Last chance to change your mind.”

“Not happening.”

Remus entered the cell. The moment he was inside, Sirius dropped the wand, then released Andromeda, who immediately scooted away from the cell, eyes wide with fear.

“What the hell was that?” Remus demanded, grabbing Sirius’ shoulder and hauling him to his feet. “What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?”

Remus couldn’t remember ever being quite so angry in his life.

“You are out of your so-called mind,” he snarled into Sirius’ face. “You bloody idiot, without Danger here, I’m not safe! You’re not going to be able to control me – not with two human beings in here with us! I’ll kill them both, you bastard!” He was having trouble even controlling his voice. “Do you want them both to die?”

“I don’t think they have to die,” Sirius said. “But I do think you have to calm down.”

“Is that a joke? Because it’s not funny. We have – ” Remus checked his watch. “Exactly ten minutes until moonrise, and I am in here with you – you threatened an innocent person to get me put in here with all of you – and you want me to calm down? Ha, ha. Very funny. And not happening. How could you do this to me?” It was almost a scream. He turned to look at Danger, so still, so white on the bed, with Aletha kneeling beside her, head bowed. “God, I don’t want to kill her, I don’t want to kill any of you...”

“Then don’t,” Sirius said matter-of-factly. “Call Danger back. She said you could do it. She told you to do it. So do it.”

“Do it,” Remus repeated. “Just do it. Just like that.” He snapped his fingers. “Is that what you want?”

“Yes. That’s what I want.”

“Wonderful. Fine. Brilliant. Only one problem. I don’t know how.” It was a virulent hiss, directly into Sirius’ face. They were almost the same height – Sirius was only about an inch taller – so it wasn’t difficult to do. Sirius didn’t even flinch as spit sprayed him.

“Now you have incentive to find out,” he said calmly.

“Incentive?” Remus couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Is that what this was about? Giving me incentive? You’re completely out of your mind, Sirius. Absolutely insane.”

“And you’re wasting time,” Sirius countered. “Believe it or not, Moony, I do have some idea what I’m doing here. Call it a calculated risk.”

Remus told him what he could do with his calculations, and his risks, and where he could go while he was doing it.

Sirius whistled. “I didn’t even know you knew some of those words,” he said in tones of admiration. “I don’t know some of those words.” His face turned serious. “You’d better get started, though. There isn’t much time.”

Remus glared at him, then turned back to the bed where Danger lay. Aletha got up, getting out of his way. “Letha – ” Remus caught her arm and stared at her, wondering if he’d ever see her alive again. “I’m so sorry. For everything.”

“Don’t be,” she said, a touch distantly. “It’s not your fault.” She embraced him, and Remus felt a little – just a little – better.

“Letha, can I talk to you?” Remus heard Sirius ask, as he went painfully to his knees beside Danger.

“I don’t really want to talk to you right now, Sirius Black.”

Remus tuned them out as he took Danger’s hand. As before, the pain in his joints receded as he touched her. But it wasn’t enough, he could feel it. Her physical presence reduced the effects of the rising moon, but her spirit – her soul – would be needed to keep the wolf entirely at bay.

“Call me home,” she said. “Call me back.” All right. I’m calling.

He gathered all his need – physical, mental, emotional, everything. His body needed her touch – his mind needed her voice – but most of all, his soul needed her love. He held all that need in his mind for an instant, shaking with the intensity of it, then released it, speaking the name of his need, sending the name forth to quest for the one it named.

Danger...

Then he waited.

Because if that wasn’t enough, he didn’t know what would be.

“What is your decision?” asked Godric Gryffindor.

Danger held herself proudly. “I have decided to stay with you, and send my magic back to my world, to hold my Pack safe against harm. So I speak, so I intend.”

“So let it be done,” answered the ten people in the room – three of them the faithful Founders of Hogwarts, seven the children of the Founders, including a son of Salazar Slytherin. He was regarding Danger curiously as the others rose to leave the room, each bowing or curtsying to Danger as they went.

“Do I have something on my face?” she asked him.

“No. I was just a touch surprised at your decision.”

“Why?”

“You didn’t strike me as the selfish type.”

And before she could come up with a reply, he had risen, bowed, and was striding out the door.

Selfish?

How, exactly, does giving up what I want more than anything in the entire world count as being selfish?

Anger boiled up in her – she strode to the door, ready to give him a piece of her mind –

The Great Hall of Hogwarts was empty.

Of course it is. This is a dream. Or a higher reality or something like that. You can probably go places just by wanting to. Like Apparating without the work.

I’ll have to learn how.

The reality of her situation began to penetrate her mind. She sank down on the steps of the dais, shaking.

I’ll have to learn how. Because I’m staying here.

I’m never going home.

I’ll never be with the Pack again.

I’ll never have another den-night.

I’ll never proofread Sirius’ stories.

I’ll never try to teach Letha how to scramble eggs.

I’ll never see the cubs off to Hogwarts.

I’ll never see any of them again...

No. That's not quite right. I'll be able to see them. If Gryffindor will teach me how to do that thing with the air – if I can learn it – then I'll be able to see them any time I want...

She looked up at the enchanted ceiling, unsurprised to see it had turned dark gray with clouds.

But I'm Pack – no, I was Pack – and we need – they need – to touch, to hold, to scent one another. Just seeing won't be enough. Not really.

But it will have to be.

The clouds were thick overhead. The Hall was dark.

Danger began, quietly, to cry.

I did what was best for everyone. I did what I had to do.

Why does it have to hurt so much?

Danger...

It was not her own thought. After eight years, she could tell the difference.

“Remus!” she answered aloud, automatically, her hand flying to her throat at the sound of his voice, so anguished, so desperate.

No. I imagined it. It wasn't him. I'll never hear his voice again...
Remus!

It was the voice he'd been wanting to hear for three hours, the voice he had feared with all his heart he would never hear again. Danger – thank God, you're not dead – but where are you? Please, come back.

No, she said as if to herself. I imagined it. It wasn't him. I'll never hear his voice again. I'll never be with him again. But I do wish I could have said goodbye...

The link between them was tenuous, threatening to break any second. Remus scanned it desperately, gleaning scant bits of facts – she was trapped somewhere, somewhere she would have considered wonderful, if it had not become her prison – she had to stay, because of some kind of deal she had made –

Any deal can be renegotiated. She could still come back.

But she can't do it by herself. She's given her word already.

As he saw more and more of the picture, he realized what he had to do.

Damn you, Sirius, you were right. This was necessary. I would never have been this desperate otherwise.

From across the cell, he heard Aletha sobbing.

Remus closed his eyes, gathered himself together, and flung his mind and soul onto his link with Danger, willing himself to be where she was, as she was, with her, together, as they should have been always...

I'll never be with him again. But I do wish I could have said goodbye...

I wish I could have held him in my arms. One last time.

Between one blink and the next, something changed.

Danger stared in front of her, at the long, black thing on the floor. A shadow. She moved her arm, and a portion of the blackness moved. My shadow.

But to have a shadow, you have to have light...

Slowly, slowly, she turned to see where this new light was coming from.

He stood behind the one lighted candle, so that she could see him clearly. His face looked exactly as she remembered it. He wore black dress robes with a crimson lining.

She rose, facing him. They looked into one another's eyes for a long moment, white and black, light and shadow, brown and blue.

Then they were together, in each other's arms, and time no longer mattered. There was only the now, and the granting of a wish which seconds before had been entirely out of reach...

And somewhere, lurking in a back corner of her mind, the understanding that this would make the eventual, inevitable, final parting so much harder...

(A/N: A special award goes to Mooncheese, for one of the most perceptive reviews I've ever had!

Next chapter: "Negotiating". See you then!)

Chapter 44: Negotiating

All her senses were fully engaged, leaving no room for real thinking. Relief and joy consumed her, and all she could articulate was the one word, the name of the man who held her as if she were his life entire.

Remus.

His image burned in her eyes, even though all she could currently see was the shoulder of his robes, into which she was crying, tasting the salt of her own tears on her lips. One of his arms held her tightly against him, while his other hand caressed her, the curve of her face, the tangle of her hair, her arm, her shoulder, her back. His scent evoked security and excitement at the same time, like the spices she used in her baking; it lingered in her nose and mouth, sweet and familiar and safe. His voice murmured words of endearment to her; she barely heard them, except that they included her name: "Danger. Danger. Oh, Danger."

No one here calls me that, she realized as if from a long way off. They always use Gertrude or Madame Granger. Never Danger. And never Granger-Lupin.

I wonder why not.

"Remus," she answered aloud finally, pulling back just enough to look into his face. He was crying too, but at the same time he was smiling so hugely that his face barely seemed able to contain it. "You... you called me. I thought I imagined it. But it was you."

"You told me to call you home. I gave it a try, but you wouldn't answer me, so I came to you." He pulled her close again, burying his face in her hair. "I've missed you," he said indistinctly. "Which, considering it's only been about three hours since the last time I saw you, is rather sad. I think I may be addicted to you."

Danger shuddered. "It should be an easy habit to break, then," she said, forcing herself to pull away. Her body complained – it liked being in Remus' arms. It was a comfortable place, and experience

proved that if she stayed there, enjoyable things began to happen. Her heart registered a protest as well. But her mind was firm. The decision was made.

“Why?” Remus asked in a light tone, but Danger noticed his posture altering slightly, from the fully relaxed pose that only she and the Pack ever saw into his more controlled public mode, and further even – into almost a fighting stance...

Danger took a slow, deep breath – and then words began to pour from her, a torrent she had almost no control over. She explained in a rush about the Founders, their role in her magic, her debt, and her decision, and she wanted to scream as she saw Remus’ face close down, watched her love retreat behind the mask he had worn to most of the world for most of his life.

He hasn’t been masked to me since the first day we met. It hasn’t been possible. We’ve been in each other’s minds almost constantly – our only secrets have been presents and pranks – and now we’re divided, closed off, and after this we’ll never see each other again...

“They’re saying you owe them for the Threefold Curse on the Dursleys,” Remus said calmly, as if he were a commander, repeating the intelligence one of his men had just brought to him to make sure he had it correct.

“Yes.”

“And they’re claiming you have to pay this alone. You, and only you. Either with your life, or your magic.”

“Yes.”

“And you chose to pay with your life.”

“I did.”

Remus gave a slow nod. “That bargain is invalid,” he said deliberately. “It cannot hold you.”

“Invalid?” Danger breathed incredulously. “How?”

“Yes, I too would like to know how,” said another voice – a man’s voice.

Every candle in the Great Hall flared to life. Godric Gryffindor stood at the entrance to the Great Hall, looking up towards them. “Remus John Lupin,” he stated flatly. “Son of John, son of Katherine. You were not invited.”

“I am aware of that,” Remus answered. “But I have an interest in this debt you claim is owed to you.”

“What interest might that be?”

“Can the others of your party join you?” Remus asked, lifting his chin very slightly, as if he considered the other man a bit below his notice. “I would prefer to state this only once, if I might.”

Abruptly they were in the small antechamber, with the Founders and their children once again lining the walls, and two chairs for Remus and Danger. “We are assembled,” Gryffindor said, leaning back in his chair. “Speak.”

“You had no right to make demands on Danger for payment of a debt in regards to the Threefold Curse invoked on the Dursleys,” Remus said smoothly.

“Why not?” asked Ravenclaw, in a rather chilly voice.

“Because the Curse was invoked, not by one, but by two people. Any debt owing from it should be paid by both of them – both of us.” Remus looked around the room, as if seeking someone who would dare deny his claim. No one spoke. “I therefore submit that your bargain with Danger is null and void, and that a new deal must be struck – a deal with both of us.”

“No,” Danger said quickly, rising from her chair. “Don’t cancel the deal. I’ll pay, I’ll do what you want.”

“He has a point,” Hufflepuff said reasonably. “In all fairness, we should do what he asks.”

“No,” Danger said, feeling panic rising in her again.

“The deal is voided,” Gryffindor said, making a small motion with his hand. “We will now begin discussion of a new payment for this debt. Pardon us, please.”

Remus and Danger stood in the Great Hall, lit now by only the single candle on the dais. The door to the antechamber was shut.

“What was that?” Danger demanded, whirling on her husband. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Getting you back,” Remus said, as if it should have been obvious.

“And what if I don’t want to go back? Did you ever think of that?”

The Hall was utterly silent. Danger felt frozen in place. Did that come out of ME?

“Have I done something?” Remus asked her, quietly, so quietly she could barely hear him, even though he was only a few feet away and no noise masked his voice. She couldn’t meet his eyes – the pleading in them was too strong, she knew she’d give in if she looked at him. “Is it something I’ve done, to make you not want to come back?”

“No,” Danger said, hearing her voice come out high and shrill, like Hermione’s when she was trying to lie – Neenie was a terrible liar, always had been, but she was excellent at telling only that part of the truth which she wanted you to know...

Remus heard it too, she could tell. “I don’t believe you,” he said, advancing on her. She backed away, feeling her breathing coming harder. “Let’s try again. Why don’t you want to come back?”

“If I come back, I’ll be without any of my powers. I couldn’t warn us of trouble, I couldn’t help if anything went wrong – I’m a terrible wand-user, you know that – I’d be a liability, you’d have to defend me instead of me helping to defend – ”

“We could work around that. And most people get along just fine without knowing the future. Try again. Why don’t you want to come back?” He was closer to her than he had been, and she realized with a mild shock that she was backed into the wall, cold stone against her back and arms, making her shiver.

“ I wouldn’t be able to tame you. You’d have to transform uncontrolled. You’d be back to where you started.”

“Nice try, but no. I lived with what I am for years before I met you.”

“And you couldn’t hold down a job, you could barely put food on the table – at least then you had a house and a car of your own, now you don’t even have that – ”

“And you think the Pack’s just going to fall apart and leave me out in the cold? Danger, there’s something more here. Something you don’t want to tell me. Why not?”

“I don’t want to hurt you. Not like this. Please, don’t make me. Don’t make me.”

“I want to hear whatever this is you have to say. You have to let it out. What has you so scared that...” Remus stopped, understanding dawning in his face. “Your fear,” he said in tones of comprehension. “Your greatest fear. I’d almost forgotten. That’s what we all have to face tonight. Our greatest fear. What is it? What has you so frightened that you’d leave everything you love rather than face it?”

“No,” Danger breathed, shaking her head, shivering harder than ever. “No. No. I can’t. I can’t do this to you. I can’t tell you this. Please, not this. Not this. Don’t make me do this. Please. I don’t want to hurt you this way, please, don’t make me...”

“Tell me.”

It was her alpha, not her husband, who stood before her now. It was the leader of her Pack. And he had given her a command.

She had to obey.

She was shaking so badly she could barely speak. “I’m... I’m afraid...”

“Now,” Remus said harshly.

“I’m afraid you won’t love me,” Danger cried, her voice breaking, along with her heart. “I’m afraid you won’t love me without my powers. I’m afraid you only loved me because of what I could do for you. And now you’ll hate me for thinking such awful things about you, and you’ll listen to me and go back and leave me here and forget me, and I’ll stay here and find someone for you to love, someone who’s good enough for you and wouldn’t ever think these horrible things...”

She sank to the floor, weeping.

There. It’s done. I’ve said it. It’s over.

And now I never have to face him again.

But he, it seemed, had other ideas...

“I never knew,” his voice said slowly from above her, then again from her same level. “I never knew you were afraid of that.”

“I hid it,” Danger sobbed out, her face on her knees, so she wouldn’t have to see his face, wouldn’t have to see how much he hated her now. “I always hid it from you. I didn’t want to hurt you. You’re too good. I don’t deserve someone like you...”

His hand cupped her chin, lifting it gently, forcing her to look up into his eyes.

There was no hatred there.

Only understanding, and a love so deep she could have drowned herself in it – and I want to, so much, but...

“Would it help if I told you mine?” he asked softly. “My greatest fear?”

Her voice choked with tears, Danger nodded.

“It is what it’s always been,” he said, still holding her eyes with his own. “Ever since that first night we dreamed together, when I realized what you were saying to me. It took me a moment to connect my name with the words ‘I love you’, coming from a woman like you. I’d never expected anything like it to happen to me. And from that moment on, I was petrified that one day, you were going to wake up out of the dream you’d been walking around in and realize how much better you could do than me.”

Danger blinked at him, lifting a hand to wipe her eyes so she could see his face. He was as serious as she had ever seen him. No trace of humor was anywhere in his expression or his voice.

But he has to be joking. He can’t mean this.

Can he?

“I’ve always been afraid that you would leave me. That you would figure out that you didn’t need all this stupid werewolf crap. That you didn’t have to spend the best years of your life hiding like a criminal because your husband’s best friend was on the run. That you deserved better than me. And when you did, you’d pack up, take Kitten, and go.” Now he gave a quiet chuckle. “Imagine my surprise now, when you’re telling me exactly the same thing.”

Danger’s breath was coming in shaky gasps, her mind was in turmoil. If it’s true – if it’s true –

Oh, God, please let it be true!

“Danger – I would go through an uncontrolled transformation every night, if I knew I would see you in the morning. You’ve changed my life in so many ways – and the taming is one of the least important of them.” He smiled wryly. “It’s very nice, very convenient, I’ll admit I like not having to patch myself up every month – but I would do it again in an instant if it meant I got you back.”

It was beginning to sink in. He loves me. He still loves me. He wants me back. Without my powers, he wants me back.

Because he loves me. Not my powers. Me.

Remus slid his hands around her face and held it, his thumbs caressing her cheekbones, his eyes still locked on hers. “When you left, something happened to me,” he said softly. “Andy had to hit me over the head with it before I could see it. I wanted to die. Without you, I didn’t want to live. And that scares me a lot.” His hand traveled down her face, gently returning a stray strand of hair to its place. “I’m afraid. I need you. Please, help me.”

How the hell does he remember things like that?

“You know me too well, love,” Danger murmured back, letting what she was feeling show on her face – shock, relief, astonishment, joy, and love indeed, a love to match his own, more than she had ever dreamed she could hold. “I can’t not come, if someone needs me.”

His eyebrows went up momentarily in recognition. Otherwise, his face didn’t change from its look of determination. “Then you’ll come back?”

Danger took a deep breath to answer the most important question of her life.

“Yes. I’ll come back.”

And then she was being more thoroughly kissed than she could remember being in roughly the past decade or so.

And since before then I'd never even had a date...

Yes, I'd say this is my best kiss ever.

Alexander was right. I was being selfish. I was letting my fear play with me. I wasn't thinking about what the Pack would want. Of course they'd want me back, powers or no powers. That's how they are.

I was just being stupid and selfish and scared.

"Do you love me?" Remus asked her as he lifted her off her feet and twirled her around, laughing.

"I do," Danger answered, laughing with him. "I do!"

It was the work of a moment to will a veil onto her head, and once she had, they both laughed harder than ever, as Remus put her gently down in the correct spot, the place where they had stood together in their first ever shared dream.

"You may now kiss the bride," Danger said coyly, tilting her head back.

"Not yet," said a tart female voice, making both of them jump.

The candles ignited again. The Founders, both original and second generation, were standing in a semi-circle below the dais, looking up at the two of them. Rowena Ravenclaw stood slightly forward. It was she who had spoken.

"Our business with you is concluded," she said, her tone softening slightly. "You have learned what you needed to learn."

Danger's free hand (the one not holding Remus') went to her mouth as she comprehended. "This... this was a test. You were testing me – us – to see what we'd do – weren't you?"

“Very good, dear,” said Helga Hufflepuff approvingly. “I do hope you won’t hold it against us, it is what we do. And you’ve both passed with full marks.”

“We haven’t had anyone do so well in over a hundred years,” said Margaret Ravenclaw, rubbing her left elbow in thought. “Oh, what were their names? Those little red-haired boys, the brothers, you remember them, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course I remember them,” Sophia said. “I remember you asking me if I’d made a mistake with their threads. When you know perfectly well I don’t make mistakes.”

“Oh, no?” Brenna challenged. “What about that time in the other universe when you measured one sixty-five years too short?”

The other universe? Danger wondered as the sisters began to squabble. Then she shook her head. Never mind.

“Girls, enough,” said Rowena in a carrying tone. The sisters subsided.

“Because you have done so well, all conditions are lifted,” Godric continued. “You will return to your own world, at close to the time when you,” he looked at Remus, “left.” Then he turned to Danger. “With your powers intact. You have earned them honestly by facing your fear and defeating it.”

Danger closed her eyes in relief. Thank heaven, Remus won’t suffer for this.

I guess being willing to suffer for me was enough.

“As well, we offer you a boon,” Godric concluded. “Anything within our power to grant. And our power is considerable.”

Remus looked at Danger. Ideas? he mouthed.

She nodded.

Go ahead, his hands said, right forefinger tapping left knuckles.

Danger turned to the Founders. "Give us what we need," she said.

"Ooh," Adam Hufflepuff said admiringly. "Nice one. Alex, you sure she's not related to you?"

Alexander Slytherin sighed. "Sadly, yes. You know who is."

The Founders all nodded grimly.

"But no more of that now," Paul Gryffindor said, grinning at Remus and Danger. "The gifts, esteemed friends, the gifts. In order – Gaga, you're first."

Helga folded her arms and tried to look stern. Unfortunately, her face wasn't built for stern. "What have I told you about calling me that, young man?"

"Hmm." Paul looked up at the ceiling as if seeking answers there. "Don't rush me. Oh yes, it was 'If you ever call me Gaga again, I'll throw you in the lake.'"

Alex began to chant. "Lake, lake, lake, lake..."

Adam and the Ravenclaws joined him. "Lake, lake, lake, lake..."

Paul looked unsettled. "Maura, a little help here?"

Maura smiled innocently and joined the chant. "Lake, lake, lake, lake..."

Paul whimpered slightly.

"Later," Godric said severely, but Danger saw his lip twitch upwards. "Alex, would you begin?"

“Gladly, sir.” Alex came forward and placed a hand on Danger’s breastbone, directly over the pendants she wore, pressing them gently into her chest. His other hand went onto Remus’ chest in the same place. “My gift to you,” he said. “The chains and pendants you wear shall be tangible only to those people and things for whom you wish them to be tangible. So that no one shall ever take them from you.”

He stepped back and bowed to them, as Rowena Ravenclaw stepped up.

“My gift to you,” she said, placing her hands in the same position. “The pendants you wear shall act in the manner of a Pensieve, recording your memories. And if two or more share a chain, they shall be able to view the memories using spells which you shall know, and their minds shall be linked, allowing silent conversation.”

Well, that’ll be useful.

Ravenclaw stepped away with a dignified curtsy, and Helga Hufflepuff took her place. “My gift to you,” she said. “The chains you wear shall grow or shrink as you will them to, and the ends of the chain shall grow together or apart as you wish, with no need for a clasp.” She smiled at them. “So that you may share your memories more freely.”

Godric Gryffindor was last, and as he stood before them, Danger almost – but not quite – figured out who it was he reminded her of.

I think it’s more than one person. Maybe two. Or three...

“My gift to you is already partially given,” Gryffindor said, his hands on their chests. “It was in the original materials you used to make these pendants. They grow warm or hot when another who wears them is in emotional distress, and cool or cold when one who wears them is in mortal peril. To this, I add that the carving which represents that person will glow, so that you may know who it is you must aid.” He smiled slightly. “After all, a warning doesn’t help much unless it’s specific enough to work from.”

He stepped down, and to Danger's surprise, Maura Gryffindor came forward.

"This gift is for the two of you, alone," she said. "The other gifts have been for your entire Pack – all your pendants will behave in this manner. But I have a gift for you and only you."

She took Danger's right hand and Remus' left, forming a rough circle. "May the power that descends from my father through me be shared between you as all things are shared," she intoned. "From this day forward, power over fire is yours to command."

She dropped their hands and returned to her place. Danger stared after her. Did she just...

Experimentally, she looked up at a candle. Go out.

It went out.

She stared at it. Relight.

It did.

"Wow," she breathed.

"That's an understatement," Remus murmured in answer.

"Now it is time for you to return," Ravenclaw said. "You must go first," she said to Remus. "Alone. And you must play the part of Orpheus."

"Don't look back." Remus smiled. "I'll manage. I trust you." He looked at Danger. "See you at home, Eurydice," he said softly. "I love you."

"Don't jinx it now," Danger said, rolling her eyes. "I love you. See you there."

Remus turned away from her, took one step – and vanished.

The Founders faced Danger, separating themselves into four distinct groups.

“Savior of the Savior, we bid you farewell,” Helga and Adam Hufflepuff said in the tones of a ritual.

“Beloved of the Heir, we bid you farewell,” the three Gryffindors spoke together.

“Bearer of Hope, we bid you farewell,” intoned the four Ravenclaw women.

Alexander smiled at her. “Go in peace, Danger Granger-Lupin,” he said softly.

Danger lifted her hand in farewell as the whirls of color enveloped her. For the first time in a long time, Danger saw a coherent scene as she fell.

“Letha, can I talk to you?” Sirius asked. Over his shoulder, Danger could see bars, and indistinct forms – this must be right now. Or just a little while ago. After Sirius got us all moved in together. Remus’ memories of the last three hours had activated in her mind just before the scene had started to play, so she was more or less up to speed.

“I don’t really want to talk to you right now, Sirius Black,” Aletha answered, turning away from him coldly.

“Why not?”

“Why not?” Aletha hissed, spinning around and showing him a face so furious that Sirius took an involuntary step back. “Why not. You can do something like that, and then ask me why not. How could you do that? How? Do you know what you’ve done?”

“I got us put in together,” Sirius protested. “It had to happen. We need each other.”

“But – at what price, Sirius?” Aletha’s voice was half-pleading, half-furious. “You betrayed Andy – she has to have trusted you to come close enough for you to get her – she’s not stupid – and you betrayed me. Because I told her she could trust you. And now I don’t know if I can trust you any more.”

She turned away and leaned her forehead against the wall.

“Oh,” Sirius said in what sounded like relief. “Oh. If that’s all it was – ”

“All,” Aletha repeated venomously, making Sirius wince. “Yes. If you want to put it that way. That’s all. You’ve only made me think of you the way the rest of the world does – and consider that maybe it’s not quite so big a leap as I’ve always thought it was. That’s all.”

Sirius moved like lightning, pulling Aletha away from the wall, spinning her around, and pinning her in the nearby corner, facing him. “Do you want to know what really happened?” he hissed into her face. “Do you?”

Aletha glared at him in mingled fear and loathing. It made Danger’s stomach turn. She’s losing it – it’s getting to her, being locked up like this, it’s affecting her, she’d never doubt Sirius if she was normal –

“Andy knew what I was doing the whole time,” Sirius said in a breathy whisper, his lips close to Aletha’s ear and barely moving. “She let me do it, Letha – hell, she practically gave me her wand – and she knew I wasn’t going to hurt her. She was acting. We both were. Think back. What hand was I holding the wand in?”

Aletha, now shaking slightly, closed her eyes. “You had it in... your right hand,” she said slowly. “But...” Her eyes opened, and she stared at her husband, her face clearing. “Oh.”

“Yes,” Sirius said, heaving a sigh of relief. “Yes. Exactly. I’m so sorry – I never meant to scare you – ”

Aletha's face crumpled. "Hold me," she whispered, an instant before she burst into noisy tears.

Sirius slid his arms around her and held her against him as she buried her face in his shoulder and sobbed.

And that's her worst fear – that somehow, everyone else is right and she's wrong, and Sirius really is some kind of insane murderer – and there it goes, confronted, defeated, and gone.

And Sirius managed to fight off his somehow – since he's obviously operating normally, if he can figure out a way to get us what we need most – each other –

Danger smiled triumphantly. The Pack wins again. Four-and-oh, we are undefeated, ladies and gentlemen.

The scene vanished. Everything vanished. The world was dark.

That's because you have your eyes closed, chuckled the voice she wanted most to hear.

Danger opened her lids and saw what she most wanted to see – a pair of blue eyes, swirling with brown, inches from her own, and the face they belonged to, the face of her beloved, smiling at her.

Welcome home, he said softly.

Thank you. Danger sat up slowly, testing her body. Everything seems to be working, she reported.

"Hoy, I know you," said the voice she second-most wanted to hear. "Decided to come back and join the fun, did you?"

"Hey there, mangy mutt," Danger greeted her Pack-brother, grinning at him. "Ready for your happy ending?"

“Anytime now,” Sirius said with a wink, slapping Remus on the back as Danger and Aletha embraced. “Good work, Moony,” he said to his friend.

“Thanks for helping me, Padfoot,” Remus answered. “But I have to ask – how the hell did you know what to do?”

Danger and Aletha both looked up at this.

“Danger told me,” Sirius said. “And royal stars shall trust in him. So life, not death, shall bring this Grim. When I thought about it, I realized it meant that I had to do something that made Andy have to trust me, and that whatever it was, it would work, even if it didn’t look like it would. Does that make any sense?”

“No,” Aletha said frankly. “But it did work, and that’s the important part.” She smiled tearily. “It really worked. We’re together again.”

Danger looked at her watch and winced. “And we have about one minute to moonrise. Let’s get that out of the way, and then we can swap stories.”

“We’ve got a few you won’t believe,” Remus said with a grin. “And a whole new way to tell them, too.”

“Don’t look now,” Sirius murmured, “but there are some severely confused people out there.”

As if it had been choreographed, the rest of the Pack turned to look.

Andromeda Tonks was smiling hugely. Auror Halcyon’s mouth was open. Amelia Bones looked suspicious. Kingsley Shacklebolt seemed calmly satisfied. The other two Aurors were gaping openly.

“Here, get off the bed,” Aletha said, coming back to life. “Let me have the sheet. We’ll hold it for you. You can at least have some privacy, Remus, even if we are in jail.”

Do me a favor, love? Remus said privately.

Anything.

Tell Andy, if she wants to, she can watch.

(A/N: See? All better! Everything came out OK! Well, more or less... they're still in jail, and still away from the cubs... but that will start changing in Chapter 45, which is currently untitled.

So keep an eye out, and breathe easy, everyone – the Pack is back together! Tell me how happy you are in your reviews!)

Chapter 45: Reap What You Sow

Leticia Halcyon had seldom been so confused in her life, and she didn't like it.

She stood with Amelia Bones, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and two other Aurors, whom she vaguely recognized but couldn't put names to, while Sirius Black and his wife held up a sheet screening off Remus Lupin and his wife from view, though they were allowing Andromeda Tonks to see what was behind it.

Let was just as happy. She had no wish to see a man transformed against his will. And she didn't understand why the four prisoners were suddenly acting like everything was all right. A werewolf was a werewolf, whether his wife was awake or not.

But, still, if the reports she had read were correct, the four of them lived in the same house, raised children together, and had for several years. So if they thought there was no danger, maybe they were correct...

Healer Tonks began scribbling notes at a furious rate as, Let assumed, the moon made its way above the horizon, triggering the lycanthropic transformation. After a few moments, Black and Freeman-Black lowered the sheet to reveal Granger-Lupin kneeling on the floor, stroking the head of a grey wolf, which regarded them all with mildly amused blue eyes, as if to say, "What are you looking at?"

"Unbelievable," Bones said quietly. "Simply unbelievable."

Privately, Let agreed.

"Madam Bones?" Andromeda Tonks rose from her place against the wall. "May I have a word with you?"

"Of course. Shacklebolt, Williamson, Narpin, thank you, you're dismissed. Halcyon, you too."

"No – if she could stay? She should hear what I have to say."

“All right.”

The other Aurors departed, the smallest of them (now identified for Let as Narpin) casting an unbelieving glance over his shoulder as he went, with the consequence that he ran himself into the corner he was trying to turn, making Black snicker and Freeman-Black smile.

Tonks looked at Black, who nodded to her. “I’m afraid you moved these people together under false pretenses,” she said. “The fact is, I wasn’t really a hostage. I agreed to play the part in order to get Mrs. Granger-Lupin to her husband in time for moonrise.”

Bones looked like Let felt – stunned.

“I’m very sorry for deceiving you, I understand it might even be a criminal offense, but in all honesty, would you have moved them together if I’d just asked?”

Slowly, Bones shook her head.

“That’s what I thought. And the situation truly was desperate. If I’ve broken the law, I’ll be glad to take the punishment for it – I don’t want to get Sirius in any more trouble than he’s already in.”

“You may be the only person in England who takes that stance,” Black said dryly. “So thank you.”

Bones looked from one of them to the other. “You knew what he was going to do?” she asked Tonks. “You agreed?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Bones looked back at Let and sighed. “None of this ever happened,” she said. “I gave the authorization, at Healer Tonks’ and Auror Halcyon’s request, that these four people be housed in one cell for the night, for medical reasons. Clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Let said thankfully as Tonks nodded.

“I’ll catch those other three before they can talk to reporters,” Bones said, turning to go. “With any luck, we can keep this under wraps.”

Let kept her mouth carefully closed as she watched the Head of her Department walk away.

“I wonder why she did that,” said Granger-Lupin thoughtfully.

“She just doesn’t want to do the paperwork,” Freeman-Black said positively, making the other three laugh. Even the werewolf made a barking sound that had the feeling of a laugh to it.

Tonks laughed as well. “I should get back to the hospital,” she said regretfully. “I’ve overstayed my time, they’ll be wondering what’s keeping me...”

“As long as you don’t tell them it was me,” Black said with a roguish grin that made him look like an oversized schoolboy.

“Don’t worry, I won’t. I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

A round of “Good-bye” followed her down the corridor.

“Quote, it’s nice to know we’ll have one guaranteed fan in the audience,” Granger-Lupin said.

“True enough,” Black responded – looking at the werewolf.

Let pulled herself together and cleared her throat. No matter how strange this is, I still have my duties. “Dinner comes around six,” she said. “Do any of you have... special... dietary needs?”

“No, Remus can eat whatever we do,” Granger-Lupin answered. “We would like an extra mattress and a few more blankets and pillows, though, since we’ll all be sleeping in here.”

“And a table,” Freeman-Black added.

“A table?” Let repeated.

“Yes, table,” Black said. “You eat on it, write on it, dance on it if you’re smashed enough.”

The comment surprised a laugh out of Let as Freeman-Black shoved Black affectionately. “About six feet by six feet would be ideal,” she said, “and it’s not necessary, but it would be very nice to have.”

Let pulled out her wand and, concentrating hard, conjured a large wooden table in the middle of their cell.

“Oh, that’s perfect,” Freeman-Black said. “Thank you, Auror...”

“Halcyon.”

Freeman-Black smiled. “Auror Halcyon. Thank you.”

I feel like a bloody stewardess, Let griped to herself as she shrank a mattress to hand-size in the next cell. This was not in the job description.

But she didn’t really mind. It made a nice change to have people in the holding cells who weren’t drunk or belligerent.

As she turned to leave the cell, a burst of sound made her jump. It was a man’s voice. Singing. Singing a song about tomorrow...

“OW!”

There were smacking noises and protestations from the occupied cell. And giggling. A great deal of giggling.

Let had to remind herself firmly that Aurors were not supposed to get emotionally involved. It was difficult, when one was watching the man who was supposedly the worst criminal Azkaban had ever held, being beaten up by two women with pillows.

“I hate that song,” Freeman-Black said firmly, in between thumping her husband. “And it was written for someone Neenie’s age. Which you are not. And for a girl, which you also are not.”

“Ow – Merlin’s beard, Danger, get off, I can’t breathe – fine, fine, I won’t sing it any more.”

“Good,” Granger-Lupin said, getting off Black’s chest.

Well, not belligerent towards me, at any rate.

Let slid the mattress into the cell and restored it to full size, complete with blankets and pillows. “Excellent,” Black said, shoving it under the table. “Thanks.”

“Will you be needing anything else?” Let said, giving in to the temptation to use a perky flight-attendant voice.

“No, I don’t think so,” Freeman-Black said.

“If we do, we’ll ring for you,” Black added.

Let rolled her eyes. Just my luck, to run into a wizard who’s flown on a Muggle airplane.

A pillow flew across the cell and hit Black in the back of the head.

“Quote, don’t antagonize the lady with the wand,” Granger-Lupin said sweetly.

Black picked up the pillow, which had teeth marks in one end. The werewolf, sitting on the bed, allowed its tongue to loll out in an excellent approximation of a grin.

Let decided to leave before anyone could see how close she was to laughing her head off.

Luna sat at the Weasleys’ secondhand piano, kept carefully tuned and lovingly polished, playing the accompaniment of a Christmas song. Ron added a soft beat on his hand drum, putting gentle

syncopation into the music. Ginny stood beside them, waiting for her cue.

The music room floor had been cleared of furniture and the various assorted junk that hung around the Burrow. Meghan stood at one edge of the clear area, breathing with the beat, poised, ready.

Ginny began to sing. Meghan seemed to float across the floor. The other cubs, curled in a corner out of her way, watched almost reverently as their sister lost herself in her dance.

Ginny's good, Draco commented.

So's Luna, Harry answered.

Hermione's purr, which had been keeping time with the music, faltered ever so slightly. Ron's all right, she said after a moment. But let's watch Meghan.

Ginny's voice soared. Meghan sank gracefully to the floor, in perfect time. The little girl's arms were uplifted, her face rapturous.

Draco gave a slight yip of surprise. My paw feels funny, he said.

Mine too, Harry said, noticing a tingling sensation in his left front paw, which had actually been going on for quite some time.

Will you two be quiet? Hermione demanded.

Ginny lingered for a long moment on the highest note in the piece, then came down to finish.

The cubs howled (in Harry and Draco's cases) or yowled (Hermione) their appreciation.

"Can I call you back in five minutes? Thank you." Dorothy Boot came into her living room, flopped down in a chair, and sighed.

"What's wrong, Mum?" asked her son Terry, looking up from his book.

“Oh, there’s a special session of court tomorrow, and they want me to come in and scribe for them,” Dorothy said dejectedly. “They’ll pay me overtime, and heaven knows we need the money, but I hate leaving you here all by yourself on Christmas Eve.”

“You could ask Gran to come and stay with me,” Terry suggested. “Or I could come with you.”

“Of course, Mum,” Dorothy said, slapping herself on the forehead. “I’m so daft – thank you, little love, I’ll give her a call right away.”

Terry waited until his mother was out of the room before making a face.

I should have just said “I could come with you”. I shouldn’t have suggested Gran. Now I won’t get to go.

Unless Gran could take me...

“Mum?” Terry asked, meandering into the kitchen.

“Not now, I’m on the phone. Hello? Mum, it’s me. Yes, Happy Christmas, yes, I was going to call today or tomorrow, but I’ve got a bit of an emergency here. What? Yes, I can hold.” Dorothy put her hand over the phone. “What is it, Terry?”

“Can Muggles use the Floo Network?”

“Well, not by themselves, but they can Floo with a wizard or witch, two at a time – why?”

“Just wondering,” Terry said, nipping quickly back out of the room before his mother could wonder why he was wondering.

I can always get around Gran.

Now I’ll finally get to see what Mum does for a living.

Just as her shift was ending, Let heard a sound echoing down the corridors. It was a woman's voice, singing about a little white flower, which looked happy to meet her in the mornings. A man's voice took over after a few lines, wishing the flower to grow and bless the land forever. When he had finished, they sang it again, this time together, sometimes in unison, sometimes in harmony.

God, that's beautiful. There's something about these people...

Let made up her mind to get to the trial the next day, if she possibly could.

When everyone was in bed that night (the animal-cubs had claimed the lower half of Meghan's bed), Harry decided to have a look at his paw. He tugged at the bandage with his teeth until it came off.

That's funny.

His paw pad was smooth and unmarked, as if it had never been cut.

He shrugged. It doesn't matter. It's actually a help. We'll have enough to worry about tomorrow without having to think about hurt feet, hands, paws, whatever.

But we are going to save the Pack.

Because we have to.

There isn't anybody else who can.

At the Leaky Cauldron, Tom looked up as a woman entered the pub, carrying a suitcase. "May I help you, ma'am?" he asked.

"I'd like a room for the night," she said with an accent. "And directions to Gringotts, please."

Sirius awakened from an unpleasant dream about his big cousin Bella and the time when he'd been seven that she'd managed to tie him up and stuff him into the linen closet. It had been two hours before anyone had found him. He'd never liked enclosed spaces much since then.

But this, I don't mind. Contradictions, much?

The beds were made up with two flat sheets, rather than one flat and one fitted. Consequently, there were four sheets for the Pack to use in making their den for the night. Aletha had used two of them and the table to make a tent, giving the Pack some privacy for sleeping.

Which is even more welcome because of our sleeping attire.

Their arrests had been fairly hurried, so they hadn't had time to pack changes of clothes. To save their robes for the trial, they were sleeping in their underwear.

And of all the days to wear the Christmas tree boxers...

At least they weren't the ones with the little yellow duckies.

Aletha made her faint "but-I-don't-want-to-wake-up" sound. Sirius looked at his watch.

Eight-forty-five. The trial starts at ten-thirty. We have time.

He spent a few moments studying the beautiful face before him, wishing he could permanently engrave the lines into his mind, just in case something terrible happened.

If we're going to talk about fears, I side with Moony – losing Letha's right up there for me. But I might – MIGHT – be able to handle it. I don't want to, I'm not hoping for it, but I might be able to take it. As long as I wasn't alone.

He stopped, surprised by his own thoughts. It's official, then. I don't even fear Azkaban as much as I fear being alone.

He smiled grimly. Though the two do sort of go hand in hand.

Trying to steer his thoughts onto a more positive track, he looked over at Moony, still in wolf form since the moon hadn't set quite yet, sleeping in Danger's arms. The Founders. Debts. Gifts. It's almost too weird to believe...

Except for the evidence.

The lights in the prison cells went out at 9. The Pack had wanted to stay up and talk. Danger had closed her eyes and concentrated, and a tiny, smokeless ball of fire had appeared inside the tent, casting enough light to see by, possibly enough to read by, if there had been anything to read.

And the Pack-pendants certainly behaved as Danger said they should. Sirius had tested his own – the chain lengthened or shortened at his wish, the clasp came undone with a pull and redid itself if he simply put the two ends of the chain together, it passed through his clothing if he willed it to, and when Danger had tossed her own chain over his head, Aletha's, and Remus', he'd been able to hear everyone's thoughts as if they were spoken words.

And it only picks up the thoughts you want to send to the other people. Which is nice. I have a lot of thoughts I wouldn't want shared even with my Pack.

Friendship, after all, only went so far.

And Remus would probably not be too happy to hear Sirius' frank appraisal of Danger in her undergarments, Pack-sister or no Pack-sister.

He's very lucky Letha had a prior claim on my affections, or he would have had serious competition.

No pun intended.

Aletha gasped as her eyes flew open. "Sirius!"

"I'm here," Sirius said quickly, returning to his place beside her. "What's wrong?"

"Oh... nothing." Her breathing was returning to normal. "Just a bad dream."

“You too? Seems to be contagious.”

Aletha shivered. “Hold me,” she whispered. Sirius slid down beside her, pulled a blanket over both of them, and embraced her, focusing carefully on her needs rather than his own.

“I dreamed they took you away,” she murmured, her face resting on his shoulder. “I dreamed we never saw you again.”

Well, there’s a mood-killer for you.

“Then it’s a good thing you’re not the one in this Pack with prophetic dreams, now isn’t it,” Sirius said lightly.

“Yes. A very good thing.”

A shifting sound from the other end of the tent made them both look up.

The moon must have set. Remus’ form was blurring, changing from gray wolf to black-clad human, since of course he hadn’t thought to take his robes off before transforming. As Sirius watched, Remus stretched slightly and readjusted his position into something more comfortable for a human, and Danger shifted to accommodate him.

All without ever waking up.

Damn, but they’re cute.

He felt something brush past his face.

I love you, Sirius Black, Aletha’s voice said in his mind. And I won’t let anything happen to you.

Sirius turned back over to face his gorgeous wife, whose chain now rested around both their necks. That’s good to know, he answered, pulling her closer to him, luxuriating in the touch of her skin, perhaps all the more because he was fully aware it might be one of the last

times they ever held one another. With you, I think I could face anything.

Including being tried for crimes you didn't commit?

Especially that. Sirius moved in for a kiss. Because I know you'll be there by my side, telling the world the truth.

Yes. It will be nice to finally be able to tell everyone the truth.

At 9:30, the guest staying at the Leaky Cauldron bought a copy of the Daily Prophet and began to peruse it carefully

She was reading, both to see what it said, and to see what it didn't say.

At 9:45, Molly Weasley was startled by a scream. She jumped to her feet and ran into the living room, where she found Meghan Black, lying on the floor alone, screaming at the top of her lungs. "I WANT MY MUM!" the girl was screaming, drumming her feet against the floor. "I WANT MY DAD!"

Oh, dear, Molly thought with a sigh. It wasn't that she didn't know, perfectly well, how to deal with temper tantrums. But this girl was not her child. Her usual methods might be frowned upon by the girl's parents.

Supposing they ever come back.

Molly suppressed that thought and knelt beside the girl. "Meghan, please, love, calm down."

"NO!" Meghan screamed. "NO, NO, NO, I WON'T, I WON'T!"

Unbeknownst to Molly Weasley, that phrase was a signal.

Hagrid stood in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic, looking around nervously at the crowds exiting the Floo fireplaces, and the people popping in out of thin air. An older woman stumbled out of one fireplace with a boy about the age of the older cubs clutching her waist. One or the other of them's not magic, Hagrid thought.

Then someone tugged on his coat. He turned around.

Three children stood there, two with red hair, one a frizzy blonde who looked a bit lost. She was clutching a grey kitten, while the red-haired girl held a small white fox. Ron had a wolf beside him – a wolf with green eyes – and a cage in his hands.

“He still asleep?” Hagrid asked.

“Never moved,” Ron confirmed, handing the cage over. “Will she be here soon?”

“Should be – she said ten, it’s nearly tha’ now – c’mon, let’s get out o’ the crowd a bit.” Hagrid led the way to a slightly more secluded corner of the Atrium. Ron started pacing as soon as he had a clear bit of floor. The red-haired girl had a finger in her mouth – probably biting her nails, Hagrid thought. The blonde seemed unconcerned, trading kitten for fox and sitting down on the floor with the kit in her lap.

It was probably only a few minutes, but seemed like a lot longer, before Minerva McGonagall found them.

“Well, here I am,” said Minerva, slightly breathless from fighting through the crowd. “So what was so urgent that you couldn’t even write about it in a letter?” She was feeling a trifle testy, having woken up at six, realized what day it was, and been unable to get back to sleep.

“Would yeh mind, Professor,” said Hagrid carefully, “changin’ forms and tellin’ me if any o’ these – ” He waved at the cat, fox, dog or wolf or whatever it was, and the rat in the cage. “ – would happen t’be human bein’s?”

“Human beings – ” Minerva broke off, staring at the rat.

The rat.

Hurriedly, she changed forms.

And changed back immediately, feeling her heart racing.

“They all are,” she said incredulously. “All of them. Hagrid – is that who I think it is?”

Hagrid grinned fiercely and nodded.

Minerva felt a similar grin crease her own face. Huzzah. Justice will be done at last. “But – who are these?” she asked, looking at the other animals.

The wolf nudged her hand, and when she looked down, lifted a paw and clumsily indicated its forehead.

Forehead – my God, it has green eyes –

“Harry?” she breathed.

The wolf nodded.

“That’s why no one could find them, Professor,” said the red-haired girl, who must be Molly Weasley’s youngest, as her brother nodded agreement. “Can you change them back?”

“Not here,” Minerva said, making up her mind. “Not here. And not now. Hagrid, can you hide them? In your pockets, or inside your coat?”

“O’ course.” Hagrid opened a large pocket on one side of his coat and scooped up the kitten, who Minerva assumed was Hermione, depositing her within. The fox – probably Draco – got similar treatment on the other side. “Harry c’n go in here.” He lifted the wolf easily with one hand, hiding it inside his coat.

“We’d better get home, then,” said the Weasley boy.

“Home?” Minerva said, feeling again the surge of lawbreaking spirit that had got her into this in the first place. Only now, she knew she could get away with what she was about to do. “Oh, no, Mr. Weasley. You’re not going home.”

“What?” the boy said in bewilderment.

“You’ve come this far,” Minerva said, allowing herself a small smile. “Don’t you want to see the end?”

“Are you going to take us to the trial?” the blonde girl asked.

“Yes. If you want to go, of course, I won’t force you.”

“Want to?” the red-haired girl burst out. “Of course we want to, our mum said we were too young, but she let everyone else go and we know about Wormtail and they’re our best friends, of course we want to!”

Minerva smiled in satisfaction. Yes, I foresee a fine crop of Gryffindors indeed for the next few years. “Come along, then.” Severus Snape sat in the courtroom, which was already almost full. Black may be innocent, but he will have a very difficult time proving it. And anything that gives Black a difficult time is perfectly fine in my book.

A commotion at the door heralded the arrival of Minerva McGonagall and Hagrid, who looked a bit flushed. Perhaps it was because he hadn’t taken off his moleskin overcoat. They edged along the row of seats where Snape sat. McGonagall passed him by with only a nod. But as Hagrid sidled behind him –

“Ah!” Snape clapped a hand to the back of his neck at the sudden burning pain there. It came away bloody. “Watch where you’re going, you great oaf,” he snapped at the gamekeeper, fishing in his pocket for his handkerchief.

“Sorry, Professor,” Hagrid said, looking a bit confused as he moved on down the row. I’ve been wanting to do that for years, Hermione broadcast, purring smugly.

She began to tread the inner lining of Hagrid’s pocket to clean her claws.

Molly Weasley looked up from comforting the sobbing Meghan as her Floo chimed (she'd had Carrie teach her the charm a few days after she'd learned about it). "I have to get that, dear," she told the girl. "I'll be right back – or you can come with me..."

Meghan sniffled. "I'll stay here," she said.

Molly rose and went into the kitchen, where a dark-skinned, white-haired woman was brushing off her robes. "Molly Weasley?" she asked in an accented voice, looking up. "Look, I'm sorry to just barge in like this, but I'm looking for a little girl named Meghan Black, and I thought she might be here – "

"What do you want with Meghan?" Molly asked, crossing her arms. She was entrusted to me, and no American witch is going to waltz in here and simply take her away...

Albus Dumbledore was just fastening his plum-colored robes when he heard a ripple of surprise moving through the Wizengamot's waiting room. He turned to see what it was.

A small silver cat galloped through the air and did a tiny dance in front of him. He recognized it immediately – it was Minerva's Order signal, and the dance was the one that indicated she had a message for him. Carefully, he went to the door that led into the courtroom and opened it a crack.

Ah, there she is. With Hagrid. And... are those Weasleys? He looked closer and satisfied himself that Ronald and Ginevra Weasley, and Luna Lovegood, were indeed sitting between Minerva and Hagrid, looking elated and scared at the same time.

I wonder what Minerva is so pleased about. I can see the yellow feathers around her mouth from here.

Just then, Ron Weasley noticed him, and pointed him out to Minerva, who looked up and smiled, though it looked more as if she were baring her teeth. Very deliberately, she held up a wooden cage and shook it slightly.

It contained something grey and furry, with a long, naked tail...

Dumbledore nodded slowly to tell Minerva he understood and closed the door, taking a deep breath.

“Dumbledore, do you feel all right?” asked the slightly overbearing voice of Minister of Magic Vilius.

“I am quite well, thank you, Lars.”

I cannot recall ever feeling quite so well.

An innocent man will be cleared today, the guilty brought to justice, and a family reunited.

It will, indeed, be a happy Christmas.

(A/N: And this doesn't count as a cliffie, since you all know what's going to happen...

Who can tell me who the two people are in this chapter who have been described without being named? They're both women, and you've seen them both before.

NOTE TO ALL: (sighs and prepares to repeat herself for the last time) This is approximately a fifty-chapter story. It ends with Harry, Hermione, Draco, and Ron boarding the Hogwarts Express for the first time. There will be a sequel (more like a continuation, really, there won't be any time lag at all), covering all seven of Harry's years at Hogwarts, entitled “Living without Danger”. No length estimation on that yet, besides quite long indeed. I may begin posting it soon after finishing LwD, but I owe you all a few one-shots... like the staff meeting where Minerva scolds Severus, and the twins vs. cubs prank war, and possibly a few others... and “Roman a Clef” hasn't been updated in a while... so no promises.

The “duckies boxers” bit is a nod to Neurotica and her great stories “Truths” and “Lies”! Try them if you haven't!

Coming soon, Chapter 46: “Vindication”. Don't go away now!)

Chapter 46: Vindication

You're sure? Sirius asked Danger nervously one last time, as they were escorted out of their cell by Aurors. They were all wearing his chain, which he had willed intangible to everything and everyone except the four of them. You're sure about the happy ending?

Positive. Something good is going to happen, and we are getting out of this all right. All of us. Her voice rose in frustration. But I just don't remember what, or how!

You'll have to scold the Founders about that the next time you see them, Aletha said cheerfully.

Assuming there is a next time, Danger grumbled. Curse you, Godric Gryffindor, and all your descendants after you. May you sleep late on Christmas morning and wake up to find your best present already opened.

Not much of a curse, Remus noted.

I'm not all that angry. They did let me come back, after all.

Good point.

She sat in the front row, next to her master, her face covered with a huge smile. After Black was convicted and returned to Azkaban, everyone would want to know – who had found him? Who had solved the mystery? Who had avenged poor little Harry Potter at last? And he would take the credit, and gain recognition, and admiration, and glory, and begin his rise to power anew...

Never mind that she had done the work. Never mind that she had found the slip of parchment, that she had done the investigative digging to be sure of the claim before they took it to the authorities, including interviewing that disgusting little house elf, which, truth be told, had been only too happy to take advantage of the fact that it had been ordered "not to tell anyone we are here", which didn't cover revealing that its Master, and quite a number of other people, had been there and gone again.

It was all for him. Everything was for him.

Except what she held in her hand now. That was for her. That she would do for her own satisfaction.

The door into the courtroom opened. Every head turned. As Sirius entered the courtroom, people began to mutter to one another.

“... looks so normal, you’d never dream...”

“... hope they give him the Kiss...”

“... no trace of Harry Potter...”

“... hope he didn’t suffer...”

A small woman stood up in the front row, a grin of glee on her wide, flat face. Sirius flinched as he saw what she was holding. Oh, come on. How medieval can you get?

With a small whooshing sound, the bottom of the woman’s lime-green cardigan caught fire. She shrieked and dropped the tomato to beat at the flames with her hands. They promptly went out.

I can see the headline now, Remus said blandly. “Study Shows Threatening to Throw Vegetables Increases Risk of Spontaneous Combustion.”

That was you, then.

You know anyone else with wandless fire magic?

Well, it could have been Danger. But thank you.

You’re welcome.

The Pack-adults sat in the four chained chairs provided for them.

Here comes the nasty part, Sirius said with a mental wince as the chains glowed gold and wrapped around their arms. God, I hate being tied up.

It won't be for long, Aletha reminded him. The truth is on our side.

You're not kidding, Danger said lightly. You being the truth.

Aletha sighed. I'd hit you if I could reach you.

Albus Dumbledore looked calmly down at his four friends from his place in the front row of the judges' bench. I wish I had some way to reassure them. But they seem to be doing quite well.

On with the show, then.

"State your full names for the record," he said politely, looking at Danger to indicate she was to start.

"Gertrude Kelly Granger-Lupin."

"Remus John Lupin."

"Aletha Carina Freeman-Black."

Sirius grimaced slightly. "Sirius Valentine Black."

The courtroom murmured. Dumbledore waited for the noise to die down, then nodded politely to Lars Vilias, who rose.

"The charges are as follows," he read loudly from his scroll. "Sirius Black, thirteen counts of murder. Treason, in the form of serving He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Two counts of accessory to murder. Escaping from Azkaban prison. Evading justice. Abduction, of one Harry James Potter." He had to pause to allow the noise of the angry crowd to die down. "And burglarizing the Museum of Magical Curiosities."

"That's a new one," Sirius said in surprise.

Vilias looked down his nose at Sirius. "It was discovered, upon examination of your personal effects, that your wand was in fact the same one supposedly at said museum. That exhibit was found to be a transfigured stick."

Sirius nodded, and Vilias went on. "Aletha Freeman-Black, aiding and abetting a fugitive from justice. Remus Lupin, Gertrude Granger-Lupin, the same." He rolled up his scroll and looked hard at them. "How do you plead, Mr. Black?"

"Not guilty," Sirius said levelly.

Vilias stared at him for a moment, his face contorted with anger. "How, in the name of Merlin, can you sit there and say that?"
Well, I can't very well sit anywhere else and say it.

You know, I'm very glad we remembered to link up, Remus remarked. Otherwise you'd be saying these things aloud, and you really don't need contempt of court added to that very impressive list of charges.

Oh, shut up.

"I can say it because it's true," Sirius said with just a trace of sarcasm in his voice. "The only one of those things I actually did was escaping from Azkaban, and that wasn't a crime, because I'm not guilty of anything, so I was unlawfully imprisoned and within my rights to escape."

Vilias gaped at him.

"Sit down, Lars," Dumbledore recommended quietly. "Let Amelia handle things for a minute."

Vilias sank gratefully into his chair as Amelia Bones took over. "Mr. Black," she said in her booming voice. "If you are not guilty of these crimes, then who is?"

"My wife – Ms. Freeman-Black – stole my wand from the Museum," Sirius said after a moment of silence. "And it was Remus Lupin and his wife – Gertrude – who took Harry Potter from his relatives."

“Is this true?” Amelia asked the three.

“Yes, ma’am,” Aletha replied.

“Certainly,” Remus said as Danger nodded.

“Adjust the record accordingly,” Amelia said to the Court Scribe, Madame Boot, who nodded and made a few notations. “How do you plead to the charges against you, then, Ms. Freeman-Black?” Her voice seemed a trifle bitter, and suddenly Dumbledore remembered that Aletha had once worked for Amelia, been her secretary in fact...

“Not guilty, by virtue of extenuating circumstances,” Aletha replied calmly.

Remus and Danger each gave the same reply when asked.

“Very well,” Amelia said when that was finished. “Let the record show that the defendants have pleaded not guilty to all charges.” She sat down.

“Mr. Black.” Vilias was recovered and ready for more. “How, exactly, did you escape from Azkaban?”

Sirius turned his head slightly to look over at Remus, then turned back to Vilias. “Can I pass on this question?”

“No, you cannot pass on this question!” Vilias barked. “Answer it!”

“Your Honor – ” Sirius looked directly at Dumbledore. “May I waive this question with the understanding that I will answer it if I am convicted, so that my escape will not be repeated?”

“I believe that would be acceptable,” Dumbledore said with a small smile, ignoring Vilias’ sputter.

“Where did you live after you escaped from Azkaban, Mr. Black?” Amelia took over again, since Vilius seemed unable to speak for the moment.

“In London, at numbers 71 and 73, Crozer Street.”

“Numbers 71 and 73?”

“The house is a duplex. At that time, it was owned by Aletha Freeman. She lived in one half and rented out the other.”

“To whom?”

“To Remus Lupin and his wife Gertrude.”

Amelia sorted through her papers. “According to our files, Mr. Lupin disappeared almost nine years ago, shortly after your escape. There is no record of him ever living at a London address.”

“They were using false names to avoid detection,” Sirius said. “They called themselves John and Kelly White.”

“False names,” Amelia repeated. “I see. And how did you avoid detection, Mr. Black?”

Sirius shrugged as well as he could with his arms held down. “I stayed indoors a lot, and wore a glamour charm when I went out.”

“Very well. Do you have a witness you could call, someone who can testify that people with that name did in fact live at that address?”

“I don’t think so,” Sirius said, looking slightly worried. “We really didn’t have many friends outside the family...”

“I can testify to that,” a voice rang out across the courtroom.

Remus jumped and twisted to see the speaker. The Court Scribe dropped her quill.

“If you would come forward, please,” Amelia said.

The woman did, making her way carefully down through the rows of people until she stood just in front of the Pack, facing the judges’ bench.

“Have a seat, madam,” Dumbledore said, conjuring a chair for her. “And state your name, please.”

“Susan Mary Robertson,” the woman said evenly. “I’m a Muggle.”

This caused more murmuring than almost anything except Sirius’ declaration that he wasn’t guilty.

“And how is it that you are here today?” Vilius asked, with just the faintest tinge of distaste in his tone.

“My daughter’s a witch and my grandson’s a wizard,” the woman said, looking at him squarely, “and he wheedled me into bringing him here today, and now I’m glad I did. I always did wonder where you ran off to,” she said to Remus, who looked half-embarrassed, half-pleased to see her.

Dumbledore allowed himself a small smile. “What was your relationship with the defendants, Ms. Robertson?”

“I worked with – what is your name, really?” she demanded in the same direction as before.

“It’s Remus.”

“I worked with Remus, then, for five years. I knew him as John, and his wife as Kelly. Good people, friendly, the kind you’d want in your neighborhood. I knew Ms. Freeman – Freeman-Black, is it now? – slightly, by association, since she was their landlady and a friend of theirs. I never met Mr. Black, though. But the three of them,” she indicated Aletha, Remus, and Danger, “definitely lived at that address you mentioned.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to say?” Dumbledore asked.

“Only this – their children were happy. I’ve always remembered that. They had some of the happiest children I’ve ever seen.”

Dumbledore lifted his hand for quiet as the courtroom rumbled. “Tell us about their children,” he said.

“Well, the Whites had two of their own. Twins. James and Jane. They were seven, or getting close to it, when the family disappeared. And then they’d taken in a cousin of theirs, Reggie, he was the same age as the twins – they said his parents died in a car accident. And Ms. Freeman had a daughter Meghan, a few years younger than the Whites’.”

“Thank you, Ms. Robertson,” Dumbledore said. “You may step down.”

The woman returned to her seat, flashing a quick smile in Remus’ direction as she did.

Well, that was unexpected, Remus said in bewilderment. Sue – here – and testifying for us –

I just hope they don’t throw her testimony out because she’s a Muggle, Aletha said grimly.

Dumbledore wouldn’t do that, said Sirius. At least, I doubt it.

Dumbledore and Amelia Bones were whispering together. Finally Bones straightened up.

“Ms. Freeman-Black,” she said. “You claimed when you worked at the Ministry that your daughter Meghan was adopted. Is this true?”

Aletha smiled. Finally, something I’m glad to tell. “No, ma’am, that’s not true. Meghan is my blood daughter.”

“And who is her father?”

Aletha lifted her eyebrows. "My husband," she said, in a distinct tone of "who-were-you-expecting".

Murmurs broke out everywhere.

"Quiet, please," Dumbledore said amiably. "Is your daughter present today, Mrs. Freeman-Black?"

Oh, what a nice touch, Danger commented. He's the only one so far who's called you Mrs.

"No, she's not," Aletha said.

"She is," a voice contradicted from the benches. A voice with an accent. And a familiar voice.

It was Aletha's turn to jump and twist in her seat. Aunt Amy? What's she doing here?

I suppose she came when her niece got arrested, Sirius said with a trace of humor.

Amy Freeman was working her way down the rows of seats, one hand held trustingly by a small person walking behind her.

Meghan, Sirius said thankfully. She's all right, she's alive, nothing happened to her...

Uh-oh, Remus said suddenly. She's not going to react well to this.

To what? asked at least two other voices.

Shh, Danger said as Amy and Meghan reached floor level. He was enjoying the trial, even if it wasn't going as he'd expected. Black's "not guilty" gambit was brave, but it wouldn't work in the end. He'd be convicted, no doubt, and either sent back where he belonged or simply taken care of altogether...

And as the man who found him, who tipped the authorities off, I will be back on my way...

“State your name, please,” Dumbledore said to the dark-skinned American woman, who was now sitting in the witness chair with a little girl of about seven, similarly colored, on her lap.

“I’m Amy Freeman. Amy Judith Freeman, since you people seem to like middle names.”

There was a ripple of laughter.

“And your relationship to the defendants.”

“I’m Mrs. Freeman-Black’s aunt, her father was my brother.”

“Very good.” Dumbledore sat back, and Lars Vilias took over.

“Ms. Freeman,” he said, with just a touch of condescension. “Are you also a Muggle?”

“No, I’m a witch. I work for Noxet Bank of America.”

Good God, that’s where I’ve heard the name – the highest-ranked human in any wizarding bank in the world, here?

“How did you get here on such short notice?”

“You’d be amazed what goblins can do if they feel like it,” Freeman said with a slightly challenging air to her.

Vilias looked nonplussed for an instant, then recovered. “So you are this child’s great-aunt,” he said, pointing to the little girl, who was looking at Black and the others with distress obvious on her face. “Why did you never intervene in her life?”

“Should I have?”

“Her parents seem to frighten her,” Vilius pointed out. “She looks very unhappy to see them.”

The girl began to whisper urgently to Freeman.

“Meghan is only young, Minister, not stupid,” Freeman said loudly after a moment, cutting through the murmurs which were saying that yes, of course, it only made sense that Sirius Black’s daughter would be afraid of him. “She knows what’s going on here, and what could happen. She’s not afraid of her parents. She’s afraid for them.”

“Mrs. Freeman-Black, may we question Meghan?” Dumbledore asked. Freeman-Black nodded curtly, then returned her attention to her daughter.

“What is your full name?” Dumbledore asked the child.

“Meghan Lily Black,” the answer rang out, causing a wave of whispering.

“Bad enough he betrayed the Potters,” the watcher heard a woman say behind him, “now he’s naming his child after them?”

“And how old are you, Meghan?”

“Seven and a half.”

“Old enough to know the difference between right and wrong. Tell me, Meghan, has your father ever done anything wrong to you? Has he ever hurt you, or made you afraid?”

“No.” The answer was clear and definite.

“Has your mother?”

“No.”

“Have any of these four people ever hurt you in any way?”

“No.” The child looked half scornful, half angry. “Why are they all chained down? They didn’t do anything wrong.”

“They are accused of doing wrong things,” Dumbledore said. “That means people are saying that they have done wrong. Your father is being accused of having betrayed James and Lily Potter to Lord Voldemort.”

The watcher shuddered as little gasps and exclamations of horror swept the courtroom. The girl didn’t even flinch. “He didn’t,” she said as the noise died down. Her eyes flicked towards Black for a moment, then back to Dumbledore, and she got to her feet and held herself proudly. “It was Wormtail who did.”

A dead silence fell.

“Who is Wormtail, Meghan?” Dumbledore said soothingly.

“His real name’s Peter Pettigrew. He was the traitor. And he killed all those people. Not my dad.”

“Is this true?” Dumbledore asked Black.

“Yes,” Black said savagely. “Peter Pettigrew was the real traitor. He betrayed the Potters, he killed twelve Muggles, and he framed me for it.”

“Of course, you were framed,” Vilius said overbearingly. “Honestly, Black, first you refuse to tell us how you escaped, now some cockamamie story about Peter Pettigrew – and we’re supposed to believe this without a shred of evidence?”

“Evidence exists,” a clear voice rang out in the courtroom, for the third time that day.

Everyone’s heads turned.

“The court recognizes Minerva McGonagall, Professor of Transfiguration at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” Dumbledore said.

“Evidence exists to support this story,” the witch repeated, her appearance every bit as pristinely correct as usual. “May I introduce this evidence at this time?”

“You may,” Dumbledore said.

McGonagall came down onto the floor, closely trailed by three children and –

“Oh, for... this is a trial, not a circus,” Vilius protested as three small animals followed McGonagall out. And two of the children were carrying something – the boy had a cage and the blonde girl what looked like a scroll...

“These animals are not animals,” McGonagall said crisply. “They are transfigured humans, and key witnesses in this case. If I may have the court’s permission to Untransfigure them, that being my area of expertise?”

“You may,” Dumbledore said again.

Everyone leaned forward to watch.

Oh my Lord, Danger said faintly. Remus, you know how you call Hermione Kitten?

Yes... oh, no. You’re not saying...

And we all call Draco “little fox”, Aletha said with a mental chuckle.

Is this why the Aurors didn’t see them leave, Sirius said, his tone indicating equal parts astonishment and chagrin. Because they were looking for humans, not animals. Nice one, Danger.

Thank you.

McGonagall Untransfigured the cat first, and Danger smiled joyfully as her sister's form solidified in front of her. Neenie, oh, Neenie, you're all right...

Draco was next, and as he took form, Sirius groaned mentally. His glamour won't be active...

Just as well, Remus said with a sigh. Get it all over with now.

The courtroom erupted into whispers at the sight of the silver-blond child. The name "Malfoy" was audible in many places. Draco set his shoulders back and looked forward, at the bench.

Finally, McGonagall Untransfigured Harry, and the whispers became murmurs.

"Is that..."

"I think it is..."

"... just like his father..."

Luna handed Draco the scroll she was carrying, and Ron gave Harry the cage...

The cage?

No one was quite sure who had said it, and no one cared. Because everyone could see the cage, and what was in it. Danger was sure that Harry was holding it slightly off to one side on purpose.

There was a mental yell of pure savage joy.

Ow, Sirius!

That hurt!

Sorry, Sirius said, not sounding like it, but no one cared. I don't believe it. They did it. They DID it. They FOUND the bastard!

Shh, Remus said, grinning himself. Here we go. Dumbledore leaned forward, looking down at his three favorite children. Four, as Meghan came to stand next to them. Be brave and truthful, and you will be in your parents' arms soon, little cubs... "State your names."

"Hermione Jane Granger." Some whispering.

"Draco Regulus Black." Murmuring, mostly confused, with the words "Black" and "Malfoy" audible.

"Harry James Potter." A burst of astonished noise.

"Have you ever used other names?" Amelia asked, in a tone of wanting clarification.

"When we lived in London, we were James and Jane White and Reggie Gray," Harry said, indicating himself, Hermione, and Draco respectively.

Amelia nodded in satisfaction.

Dumbledore asked the next usual question. "What is your relationship to the defendants?"

The cubs looked at one another, then huddled up for a moment, whispering. "They are our guardians," Hermione said clearly when they split up. "They take care of us."

"Are they your legal guardians?" Dumbledore asked, hoping they knew the correct answer.

"Yes," Draco said simply.

Vilius made an incoherent spluttering sound. Dumbledore turned to him.

"How – " the man managed to articulate.

“How can they be, is that what you want to ask?” Dumbledore queried, feeling an intense wish to laugh and very carefully repressing it.

Vilias nodded. Dumbledore turned back to the cubs. “Which of them are your guardians, and why?”

They huddled again briefly. “Mrs. Granger-Lupin is my older sister,” Hermione began when they were finished. “She has been my guardian since I was one year old, when our parents died.”

“Sirius Black is my godfather,” Harry said almost defiantly. “He was the guardian my parents wanted for me if anything happened to them.”

Draco stepped forward. “I have something here you should see,” he said softly, under the crowd noise at Harry’s declaration. Dumbledore nodded and Summoned the scroll Draco was holding.

“It’s a contract,” Draco went on, pitching his voice to carry. “Signed by my birth mother, Narcissa Black Malfoy, and all four of my guardians, transferring parental rights to them. And it is magically binding.”

“Signed in blood,” Amelia said, looking over Dumbledore’s shoulder. “So it is.”

“The legal guardianship of these children is not in question here,” Vilias sputtered out. “What is in question is whether or not Sirius Black is a traitor and a murderer!”

“He’s not,” Harry said fiercely. “And we can prove it.”

“Then do so,” Dumbledore said over the crowd noise.

Harry stepped forward, holding up the cage. “This rat is not a rat,” he said loudly, first to the Wizengamot, then turning to face the rest of the courtroom. “This rat is an Animagus. His name is Peter Pettigrew.

And he is the traitor and the murderer, not Sirius Black.” He turned to Minerva. “Professor, can you turn him back?”

“I most certainly can,” Minerva said, extending her hand for the cage.

“Wait,” Amelia said. “If this story is true – I’m not going to say that I do or don’t believe you, Mr. Potter, until I see some proof – but if this story is true, wouldn’t Pettigrew be a flight risk?”

“He’s asleep,” Draco said. “He’ll be asleep until three o’clock this afternoon.”

“Hagrid gave him a potion to make him sleep,” Meghan chimed in.

“Very well,” Amelia said, sitting back. “Proceed, Professor.”

Minerva accepted the cage from Harry, unlatched it, and unceremoniously dumped the rat out, then pointed her wand at the small mound of fur and concentrated.

The entire courtroom seemed to be holding its breath.

Hermione and Harry sprang back as the rat twisted and grew into a small, fat, balding man, snoring loudly as he lay on the courtroom floor.

The court exploded with noise. Sirius and Remus were staring at the man with identical expressions of loathing. Dumbledore could sympathize. Knowing Pettigrew was a traitor is one thing. Seeing him again is provoking emotions in me that I would rather not acknowledge I own...

“Pettigrew!” Vilius gasped, staring at the sleeping man.

“Aurors,” Amelia called in her carrying way. “Take this man into custody. I believe this bears out Mr. Black’s story fully?” she asked Dumbledore quietly.

“Indeed it does.” Dumbledore turned around, getting a touch of guilty pleasure from the bafflement on the faces of most of the Wizengamot. “This evidence having been presented, those in favor of clearing the defendants of all charges?” he asked softly, noting the show of hands. “And those against?”

Amelia smiled as she cast her vote.

“Very well.” Dumbledore turned back to the courtroom. “By a unanimous vote of the Wizengamot,” he said, his voice having an instant quieting effect on the crowd, “these four people are cleared of all charges.” He drew his wand and triggered the unbinding charms on the chairs. “You are free to go,” he said to the Pack.

“YES!”

Sirius sprang up from his chair and dashed forward. Falling to his knees, he snatched all four cubs into an embrace, sobbing unabashedly as they all hugged him and tried to talk to him at the same time. The rest of the Pack joined him quickly, and Dumbledore found himself having to turn away so as not to be seen crying in public.

How we have hoped for this day.

And how right to have it be Christmas Eve... a day of hope, and promise for a better life to come...

“You did it,” Sirius told his cubs, tears streaming down his cheeks and telling a wildly different story than the smile he could feel stretching his face out of shape. “You really did it!”

He released them so that Aletha, sobbing herself with joy, could snatch Meghan up and kiss her ten or fifteen times; so that Danger could pull Neenie into a twirling dance, laughing wildly; and so that Remus could embrace Draco and tell him how proud he was, how proud they all were...

But none of that mattered to Sirius. All that mattered was the boy still in his arms.

Harry.

His Harry.

And now the world can finally know it.

“Pa-foot, no c’y,” Harry said in an imitation of a little-baby voice, smiling through his own tears.

Sirius laughed. “Not a chance, Greeneyes,” he said hoarsely. “Not this time.”

He held the boy tightly in his arms, remembering that long-ago reunion.

But this one is better.

Because now there’s no way we can be parted, ever again.
Severus Snape was making his way toward the exit when he heard his name called.

“Severus! A word with you?”

He turned back automatically and wished he hadn’t. Lupin was standing at the entrance to the spectators’ galleries, his arm around his “daughter”, grinning.

“What do you want?” Snape asked, making his way down to them and keeping his tone just barely on the polite side.

“Just to give you a word of advice.” Lupin looked casually at the stained handkerchief Severus was holding. “Never anger a Granger woman if you can help it, Severus. They have very long memories. And even longer fingernails.”

The girl waggled her fingers at him flirtatiously, and the two of them ran back towards the rest of their freakish family, laughing like maniacs.

Severus watched them go, brow lowered and a scowl on his face.

I wonder if homicide is justifiable if one argues that one was provoked. I gave Sue our phone number, Danger announced to Remus as he rejoined the Pack and finally took his turn hugging Harry. Sirius had reclaimed his chain when the verdict was announced, so the Pack was back to normal methods of communication. Amy said she'll come over later today. And we're about to be invaded by a horde of locusts.

A what? Remus turned to the courtroom door, where about ten shouting people were trying to get in against the tide of those trying to get out. Oh. Reporters. Wonderful – we're in no shape to give interviews now –

“Would you care to leave before the newspeople arrive?”
Dumbledore asked from the bench.

“That wouldn't do any good, they'd just follow us home,” Aletha said in disgust.

“I have an idea,” Remus said. “Headmaster, may we – ” He stepped close to the bench and held a low-voiced colloquy with Dumbledore.

The reporters finally made it into the courtroom. Foremost among them was a bleached blonde woman in electric blue robes, holding an acid-green quill. They had barely entered before they began shouting questions.

“Mr. Black, is it true – ”

“Harry, can you tell us – ”

“Mr. Malfoy, how long have you – ”

Draco rolled his eyes and pointedly turned his back on them, as did Harry.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please,” Remus said loudly, managing to get some of their attention. “We will not be answering questions now.”

The reporters looked stunned, as if it had never occurred to them that people existed for any reason other than to answer their questions.

“We would like to have a peaceful Christmas,” Remus went on. “So we ask that you leave us alone for two days. On Boxing Day, we will be at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, in the Great Hall, at 10 o’clock, to give interviews and answer questions. If – ” He raised his hand as the reporters all began to talk at once. “If any of you try to come to our house, or owl us, or bother us in any way, we will not consent to be interviewed by you. Two days. That’s all we ask.”

“So what are we supposed to write about, then?” a disgruntled voice asked from the back of the crowd.

“You could always interview Pettigrew,” Sirius suggested.

“Two days, ladies and gentlemen,” Remus said in tones of finality. “Boxing Day, the Great Hall at Hogwarts, 10 A.M. We will see you then.”

Dumbledore handed Danger Draco’s contract, which he had unrolled to its fullest extent. “This will take you home,” he said softly. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Danger said, as the Pack took hold of the Portkey. “For everything.”

Dumbledore nodded. “One... two... three...” he counted softly...

And the Pack was traveling, flying through swirls of color and sound – just like my dreams.

Except this is for real.

And we’re going home.

All of us.

(A/N: I'm working from Dumbledore's statement in OotP that Harry's hearing seemed like a full criminal trial. I know that a real trial probably wouldn't run like this. But it was a "rush job", and it all worked out, didn't it?

Nice work to everyone who correctly identified Amy Freeman, and special shoutouts to Polarwolf and Kelly, who figured out Sue Robertson as the other unidentified character!

The little cat that came to Dumbledore wasn't a real cat or McGonagall. It was a Patronus-like thing, which I assume from hints given by JKR is what the Order of the Phoenix uses to communicate (see GoF, "The Madness of Mr. Crouch", where Dumbledore summons Hagrid).

Next chapter: "Aftermath", wherein we see the Pack celebrating their newfound freedom, the reactions of the Weasleys, and get a glimpse of a certain rat... so stay tuned!)

Chapter 47: Aftermath

At 10:53 AM on 24 December 1990, the Pack arrived in their Den by Portkey, looked at each other, and collapsed on the mattresses covering the floor.

At 10:54, the screaming started.

No one could ever clearly remember the next fifteen or twenty minutes. Everyone was sure of what, basically, had been involved: a lot of yelling, laughing, crying, running around, jumping on people, hugging, kissing, scent-touching, and at least one case of licking (though Sirius always claimed he'd just forgotten he wasn't in dog form at the moment), but no one could recall very many particulars. The eventual conclusion was that they had simply mutually agreed to disengage their brains and allow themselves to exult in the moment.

They were free. They were home. And they were together.

As Danger had recalled in her time with the Founders, the Pack had gradually come to accept, and then to need, a higher level of touch than most people did. They comforted and showed affection with touch, so it only made sense that this, their greatest celebration ever, also involved a great deal of holding one another, of stroking faces and heads, of reaffirming, by the most basic of senses, that they were really all together again.

Arthur Weasley wasn't quite sure how to feel at the moment.

He and Molly had agreed the night before that Sirius Black and his three companions could not, absolutely could not be their friends the Blacks.

Never mind that the Blacks had mysteriously vanished around the time that Sirius Black was said to have been arrested. Never mind that the Blacks were two men and two women, exactly as the newspaper reported Sirius Black and his three companions were. It was a coincidence, that was all, and they weren't going to think any more about it.

Except, of course, that Arthur had, and he suspected Molly had been as well.

What if they were wrong? What if it turned out that Patrick Black, with his open, friendly smile and his capable hands, was actually Sirius Black, a traitor and a killer? What if they'd befriended a criminal without knowing it?

And what of the Blacks' children? What had happened to them – and what would Ron do, if his friends never returned, or turned out to be completely different from who he had thought they were? Because, after all, there had always been that little nagging question in the back of his mind, confronted with a child named Harry in the custody of a man surnamed Black...

And then the morning had come, and the trial, and he'd been forced to face the facts.

He, Charlie, Percy, and Fred and George had managed to get seats in the courtroom, and the boys had stared openly as their neighbors were escorted in by Aurors and introduced themselves using quite different names than he knew them by.

It was true, then. Arthur felt ill. He had shown them his collection of plugs and batteries, his workshop in the shed – they had worked there with him sometimes. His wife and theirs, his children and theirs had been friends. He had shared some of the most important parts of his life with the men in front of him, and all the time they had been lying to him, lying about who they were and what they wanted...

But as the trial proceeded, something struck him. The names were different, yes, but the people in front of him were the same people he'd known for the last three years. They spoke and acted in the same way – even, or especially, Patrick – Sirius – with his wry humor and his frankness.

And their reactions to little Meghan (whom he was rather surprised to see, since he had left her at his home with Molly, and wondered what kind of woman this Amy Freeman was, if she could outwit his wife) were the same as his own would have been, if he were somehow

restrained and saw one of his children – they looked intensely happy to see her and almost desperate to get to her.

But criminals could put on good faces, could have a sense of humor, could care about their children, Arthur reminded himself. And Black could claim he had been framed all he wanted. None of this was proof of anything...

Minerva McGonagall stood, a few rows in front of him. “Evidence exists to support this story,” she said.

Arthur stared as he saw who was with her.

“Ron?” Charlie said incredulously. “Dad, look, it’s Ron! And Ginny, and Luna! What are they doing here?”

“And those animals,” Fred said. “They’re the ones that were at home last night...”

“They’ve got Scabbers!” said Percy indignantly. “Dad, Ron’s got Scabbers! What are they doing with him?”

George shushed them. “Look, McGonagall’s doing something...”

The animals, under McGonagall’s experienced hand, were revealed to be not animals but children – the Blacks’ children – Hermione, subtly different than she had been – Drake, or Draco, as Arthur realized belatedly just before the boy named himself – and Harry.

Harry Potter.

“We’re friends with The Boy Who Lived?” George said in an awed whisper. “Cool!”

“I still want to know what they’re doing with Scabbers,” Percy complained, just as Harry proclaimed that he could prove Sirius Black’s innocence.

“Then do so,” said Dumbledore.

Harry stepped forward, holding up the cage. "This rat is not a rat," he said loudly, first to the Wizengamot, then turning to face the rest of the courtroom. "This rat is an Animagus. His name is Peter Pettigrew. And he is the traitor and the murderer, not Sirius Black."

The Weasleys exchanged astonished looks as Harry turned to McGonagall. "Professor, can you turn him back?"

"I most certainly can," McGonagall said, extending her hand for the cage.

"Wait," Amelia Bones said from the bench. "If this story is true – I'm not going to say that I do or don't believe you, Mr. Potter, until I see some proof – but if this story is true, wouldn't Pettigrew be a flight risk?"

"He's asleep," Draco said. "He'll be asleep until three o'clock this afternoon."

"Hagrid gave him a potion to make him sleep," Meghan chimed in.

"Very well," Amelia said, sitting back. "Proceed, Professor."

McGonagall accepted the cage from Harry, unlatched it, and unceremoniously dumped the rat out – Percy made an angry noise – then pointed her wand at the small mound of fur and concentrated.

The entire courtroom seemed to be holding its breath. Arthur knew he was.

Hermione and Harry sprang back as the rat twisted and grew into a small, fat, balding man, snoring loudly as he lay on the courtroom floor.

Percy stared open-mouthed at what had been his pet for nine years as noise erupted all around. Charlie was exchanging waves with someone on the other side of the courtroom – Arthur looked and saw the boy's girlfriend Tonks grinning at him. Her hair was lime-green

today, and she was sitting next to a brunette witch Arthur vaguely recognized as the girl's mother. She was smiling and dabbing at her eyes at the same time.

"You are free to go," Dumbledore said from the bench, and the chains fell away from the four people who had, until a moment ago, been on trial.

"YES!" Patrick – Sirius, Arthur reminded himself – threw himself out of the chair and snatched his children into his arms, crying with joy. Arthur found his own eyes tearing up just a touch. The action was so like what he would have done if it had been him...

How strange. They were lying – and yet they weren't. We never knew their real names, but it seems we knew the real people after all...

Percy hadn't moved since the revelation of Scabbers' true nature. The twins appeared to be doing a war dance to the chant of, "They got off, they got off, they got off – " A silver-haired witch a few rows away grinned at them and flashed them a thumbs-up before departing her seat.

"Enough, boys," Arthur said, surprised to hear the emotion in his voice. "Charlie, watch your brothers for a moment?"

"Sure, Dad." Charlie grinned at him, though the grin trembled ever so slightly. "Got to you, didn't it," he said very quietly. "Me too."

Arthur made his way down the stairs to the courtroom floor, where three small children stood in an almost forlorn huddle, watching their friends celebrate with their parents. "Ron," he said, trying to sound stern. All three of them jumped and turned around guiltily. "How did you get here?"

"Luna!" Gerald Lovegood arrived, slightly out of breath from getting to them. "I'm so proud of you – and you're in so much trouble – Molly Weasley was supposed to be watching you – however did you get here?"

“We Floored,” Luna said, as if she couldn’t see why they hadn’t thought of that themselves.

“We had to come, Dad,” Ron said, looking earnest. “Honest, we did. Harry and the others couldn’t go by themselves, ‘cause they couldn’t say where to go. So we had to say it for them.”

“And then Professor McGonagall said we ought to stay and see the end,” Ginny added, grinning. “And we did, and it was great – they got off!” Her smile faltered. “Are we in trouble?”

“That’s for your mother to say,” Arthur said as severely as he could manage under the pressure of several conflicting emotions.

Ron and Ginny exchanged unhappy looks.

“Gertrude Granger,

“She’s no stranger,

“She’s a danger

“To us all,” Aletha chanted, grinning.

“Age of eight,

“She tried to skate,

“And didn’t wait

“To take a fall.”

Danger shoved her friend down onto the mattresses, laughing. “I cannot believe you remember that!”

“I made it up, didn’t I?” Aletha countered. “And that, my friends, is how Danger Granger got her name. She not only fell, she took down four or five of us with her – ”

“And I’ve never put on roller skates since,” Danger finished. “Or anything else with wheels or blades or things like that. I like my feet to stay where I put them.”

She shrieked as Remus hooked an arm around her ankles and pulled her down next to him on the mattresses.

“Is it legal to be this happy?” Sirius asked blissfully, lying on his back with Meghan cuddled next to him and Hermione making small braids in his hair. Harry and Draco were chasing each other around the room on all fours, switching roles from pursuer to pursued at a moment’s notice for no reason at all, and tussling joyously, like a pair of puppies, when they caught each other.

“It had better be,” Aletha said firmly. “This family’s law-breaking days are over.”

“And that leaves us with a problem,” Remus said regretfully, sitting up.

“Problem?” Sirius questioned, tickling Meghan and making her giggle.

“The Weasleys and the Lovegoods.”

“Oh.” Sirius sighed. “Didn’t think of that.”
Molly Weasley was entirely sure how to feel at the moment.

She was absolutely furious.

Not about Meghan, good heavens no – the strange woman in her kitchen hadn’t even had time to answer Molly’s question before Meghan was clinging to her, still crying, but now also babbling something at a high rate of speed – something about “Dadfoot” and “Wormtail” and every so often the words “Aunt Amy”. With that and the resemblance, which was recognizable with the two of them together, Molly had realized the woman must be some kind of relative – of course, the Blacks were originally from North America, it made sense that Carrie would have an American aunt.

Amy Freeman, once she had gotten Meghan calmed down long enough to introduce herself, had proceeded to work the little girl up again by telling her that she was going to take her back to her parents. Molly was thrilled, or that was what she told herself. The girl belonged with her family, after all. And it wasn't as if Molly didn't have enough of her own.

No, it was the last thing Meghan had told her that was making her blood boil.

"Mrs. Weasley?" the girl had said as she was ready to step into the Floo with her great-aunt. "Just so you know – everybody else went to the trial."

And then she was gone, before Molly could react to the phrase "everybody else".

Because the only other people in the house were her youngest son and daughter, and her daughter's friend...

And thorough investigation had proved that they were no longer actually in the house...

The Floo flared up. A stocky form appeared in it – Charlie, Molly guessed, and was proven right a moment later. "Ron and Ginny are with us, Mum," he said before she could ask, coughing a little as he stepped out. "And you wouldn't believe what happened – "

"Later," Molly said grimly, watching the fire like a hawk. Percy emerged next, looking stunned, then the twins, she didn't know in what order, it didn't really matter anyway, and then...

"RONALD BILIUS WEASLEY!" she shouted even before that child had fully emerged from the Floo. "COME HERE THIS INSTANT!"

Ron blanched. He knew the Name Rule well – the more of his name his mother used, the more trouble he was in. His full name, middle and all, could not be good.

“AND YOU, MISS GINEVRA MOLLY, DON'T THINK YOU CAN SNEAK OFF!”

Ginny tried to look as if that wasn't exactly what she had been intending to do.

“WHAT IN THE WORLD DID YOU THINK YOU WERE DOING? RUNNING OFF LIKE THAT, WITHOUT EVEN TELLING ME WHERE YOU WERE GOING – ”

“Mum, we had to,” Ron protested feebly as Arthur Apparated into the kitchen.

“OH, YOU HAD TO, DID YOU? DID SOMEONE'S LIFE DEPEND ON IT?”

“Molly,” her husband interjected.

“Don't bother me now, Arthur – WELL? ANSWER ME – DID SOMEONE'S LIFE DEPEND ON YOUR LEAVING THIS HOUSE WITHOUT PERMISSION?”

“Yes,” Ginny said in a small voice.

“DON'T YOU LIE TO ME, GINEVRA MOLLY WEASLEY – ”

“She's not lying, Molly,” Arthur said sharply. “Ron and Ginny may well have saved lives with what they did today.”

“How so, Arthur?” Molly asked in a quiet, dangerous voice.

Arthur explained.

Molly had to sit down.

My children – friends with Harry Potter? Saving Sirius Black from his – undeserved – fate?

And the true criminal sheltering under our roof, eating our food, for all those years...

I am not a fainting type of woman, but I might make an exception today...

“So Luna’s father took her home,” Arthur concluded. “And here we are.”

“Yes,” Molly said, shaking her head slightly in bewilderment. “Here we are indeed.”

At some point during the story, all the children had left the kitchen. Arthur took a seat at the table next to Molly and put his arm around her shoulders. She leaned back into it, needing the comfort, needing to know that her husband hadn’t changed, even though everything else in her life seemed to have.

“We need to consider what we’re going to do now,” Arthur said into the silence. “Will we continue to associate with them?”

Molly sat upright in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“I feel – bear in mind, Molly dear, this is only one man’s opinion, and a very faulty man at that – but I feel that we should attempt to remain friends with the Blacks. And the Lupins,” he added with a smile. “For the children’s sakes, and for ours.”

“For heaven’s sake, Arthur, they lied to us!”

“To keep their children safe,” Arthur pointed out calmly. “Wouldn’t we do the same in their place?”

“I’ve never been in their place – and I hope I never would be. Accused of crimes, arrested – ”

“Falsely accused,” Arthur reminded her. “Falsely arrested. They’ve been cleared of all charges, and I wouldn’t be surprised if there are

apologies forthcoming from the Ministry, and quite possibly some form of monetary compensation.”

“Yes, yes, that’s all well and good, but we’re not talking about the Ministry, Arthur, we’re talking about us, and these people whom we thought were our friends. And now we find out they’ve been lying to us for three years – ”

“What have they lied to us about, Molly?” Arthur asked quietly. “Their names, and their faces. Nothing else. Is that any worse than finding out a friend of yours dyes her hair or goes by a nickname?”

“Yes – this is deliberate!”

“It was also necessary. Molly, love, I’ve seen you with Carrie and Danger – Aletha and Gertrude – and you enjoy their company. I know you do. And I would imagine that if they’re anything like the friends you thought they were, that they didn’t want to lie to you. But if they had told you the truth, what would you have done?”

Molly sighed. “I would have gone to the Ministry, I suppose,” she said unhappily. “But that doesn’t change the fact – ”

An owl tapped on the window. Arthur got up to let it in, and it dropped one of the letters it was carrying on the table before turning around and soaring back out. Molly picked it up, seeing the familiar handwriting with new eyes.

Danger wrote this. But is that really her name, or – no, wait, she told us she was named Gertrude, the day we first met. I’d almost forgotten.

Somehow that made her feel a little better.

She slit the envelope neatly open and pulled out the contents.

“ ‘Dear Arthur and Molly,’ ” she read aloud. “‘What can I say? The masks are off, the truth is out. You must feel as if we’ve betrayed you. In many ways, we have, and we are all so incredibly sorry that it had to be that way.

“ ‘You may not believe me, but you have been some of the best friends we have ever had. We hope that you won’t shun us completely, but even if you do, we beg of you, please don’t keep our children apart.

“ ‘Harry and Draco and Hermione are famous now. They will probably be besieged at school by children who want to be their friends simply so they can be famous too. Your Ron is the best thing that could have happened to them – someone who likes them for themselves, who was their friend before he ever knew that they were anything out of the ordinary.

“ ‘If you want to talk to us, to ask us anything, please feel free to come over. The invitation extends to Ron and Ginny as well, of course. Whatever you decide, we all thank you for three wonderful years of friendship. Yours truly, Gertrude “Danger” Granger-Lupin.”

Molly and Arthur Weasley looked at one another.

“Yeah, we’ve got him locked up tight,” Alastor Moody said with satisfaction. “Anti-transformation wards on the walls of the holding cell – as long as he’s within them, he can’t change – and there’s a team over at Azkaban putting them up on his cell there right now. He’s not getting away this time.”

“Sounds good,” Sirius mumbled through a mouthful of sandwich, prompting Aletha to whack him on the side of the head and call him an uncouth lout.

“Lovers’ talk,” Moody grumbled, but Sirius caught a trace of a smile on his face. “You want to see him before we ship him over, Black?”

“No thanks,” Sirius said emphatically, putting his sandwich down on the plate. “I’ve got better things to do than talk to him. I’d rather be with my family.” He smiled, realizing that he meant what he was saying. “After all, he doesn’t matter now, does he? The truth’s out. Wormtail doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Still has to have his trial, though,” Moody said, adding in a lower tone, “though if it was up to me, they’d throw away the key and let him starve in there.” The retired Auror got to his feet. “Well, I’d better get back – what time’s that potion wear off again, three?”

“That’s what they said.”

“All right, we’ll be ready to transport him around then.” Without further ado, Moody Disapparated.

“So, we’ve had Moody, and before him we had Dumbledore and McGonagall and Hagrid,” Sirius said, ticking them off on his fingers. “After Dumbledore Fawkes-ed us...”

Aletha giggled. “If you weren’t a pureblood, I’d say that was a Muggle joke.”

“Well, I married a Muggle-born, and I’ve been living like a Muggle for nearly nine years, so yes, as it happens, that was a Muggle joke.” Sirius swept his wife off her feet and twirled her around once before putting her down. “Never thought I’d see McGonagall cry. And Hagrid – it’s a good thing he carries his own handkerchiefs, no one else’s would be big enough for him...”

“And Dumbledore brought us this,” Aletha said, picking up the copy of the special edition of the Daily Prophet, with the enormous headline:

SIRIUS BLACK INNOCENT!

“And apparently some random witch or other got filthy rich off this, because she thought to bring a camera to the trial, and got a picture of Wormtail, and one of me hugging the cubs, and since Dumbledore wouldn’t let any newshounds in the courtroom, the Prophet paid top Galleon for them.” Sirius blinked back tears at the sight of the picture, of his own ecstatic face, and Harry’s...

“We owe a lot to Dumbledore,” Aletha said softly. “He got the Wizengamot to agree to try us today, and together, so we could all be

cleared at the same time – he kept us out of Azkaban, you know it's standard procedure to send prisoners there before their trials – he was the one who made sure you even got a trial.”

“I know.” And there's probably nothing I can ever do to repay him...

But he won't care. He doesn't, as long as everything comes out all right.

He looked over Aletha's shoulder into the den room, where Harry was telling the story over again to Remus and Danger, with Hermione and Draco correcting him every few words, until he snapped something at them and they both shut up, looking chastised.

And the cubs went and formed a new Pack. With Harry as the alpha.

And they swore that oath – which we have reason to know is damn potent –

I hope Molly and Arthur believe us, I'd hate to lose them as friends, and it might be dangerous to Ron and Ginny to keep them apart from our four now that they've sworn...

The Floo chimed from the music room.

“My, we're just so popular today,” Aletha said with a little laugh. “I wonder who this could be?”

“Hello, Mrs. Black,” said Luna Lovegood as she came into the kitchen. “Hello, Mr. Black. Is Draco here?”

Draco appeared in the door to the den room. “Hi, Luna,” he said, looking a little shy but very pleased to see her.

Luna cocked her head to one side, studying Draco. “I like you better this way,” she said finally.

“I'm glad. This is how I really look.” Draco looked beyond her. “Hi, Mr. Lovegood.”

“Gerald,” Aletha greeted the man with a smile as Luna crossed the room and followed Draco back into the den room, from whence erupted a great deal of squealing as, Sirius assumed, Hermione and Meghan greeted Luna. “Thank you for coming.”

“You’re welcome.” Gerald gave Sirius a long, searching look. “So you’re Sirius Black,” he said finally.

“Yes.”

Remus and Danger came into the kitchen, Danger sitting down at the table, Remus standing behind her, leaning slightly on the back of her chair.

“And – Remus,” Gerald said, turning to him. “Remus – Lupin, was it?”

“It was.”

“Not brothers, then.”

“Not by blood,” Remus said. “But we’ve been through a lot together.”

“I can only imagine.” Gerald looked around at the Pack. “I came to tell you that I do want to stay friends with you. You were wonderfully supportive after Anita – died – and I can’t see that friendship changing over something as trivial as names. And, as you said, there are the children to consider. Luna’s become great friends with your Drake – no, it’s Draco, isn’t it? Draco Malfoy?”

“Don’t call him Malfoy to his face,” Danger warned. “He really hates that name. And he is legally a Black.”

“Of all the places people have speculated he might be, this is one I doubt anyone ever thought of.” Gerald smiled slightly. “What a story it would make – exclusive interview with Sirius Black and his sons,

Draco Black and Harry Potter – but I know you didn’ t want to be bothered – ”

“And you’re not bothering us, are you?” Sirius said, feeling an urge to do something unexpected. “Harry?” he called into the other room.

“What?” floated back.

“Run upstairs and get my DictaQuill and some parchment?”

“All right.”

“Have a seat,” Sirius said to Gerald, who looked surprised and very pleased. “And think of some good questions.”

The Floo chimed again. “I hope that’s the Weasleys,” Remus said.

Ginny came dashing into the kitchen and looked expectantly at the adults. At least three of them pointed to the other door, and she disappeared through it, to be greeted with excited feminine sounds resembling small dogs being stepped on. Ron stopped short of the second door, looking a bit dismayed by the noises on the other side, and his father and mother arrived in the kitchen before he got up the courage to go through it.

“So,” Molly Weasley said, looking straight at Sirius, who got quickly to his feet. “Sirius Black.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Sirius said respectfully. She was advancing on him, he noticed, as he began backing up almost involuntarily.

“You’ve been lying to us for three years.”

“Yes, ma’am, I’m afraid so.”

She was getting closer.

“And you’re not a dangerous criminal.”

“I certainly hope not.”

“Well, then.” She was right in his face, and Sirius realized he’d backed into the refrigerator. “I’m going to punish you right now for all the lies you’ve ever told us.”

She flung an arm around his neck, dragged his face down to hers, and kissed him on the lips.

When she let him go, Sirius was fairly sure his eyes were crossed. He knew for a fact he was smiling like an idiot. “Arthur,” he said dreamily, “you’re a very lucky man.”

Then she slapped him.

“All right, that’s more like what I was expecting.” Sirius rubbed his face.

“If you ever,” Molly shook her finger in his face, “lie to me about anything again, Sirius Black, you will regret it until your dying day. Is that understood?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Sirius saluted her.

He looked around. Harry was standing by the door, next to Ron. They had identical expressions of mingled confusion, disgust, and horror on their faces. The adults looked highly amused.

“I got what you wanted, Padfoot,” Harry said hastily, crossing the room quickly and depositing the items on the table. “C’mon, Ron, let’s go upstairs.”

Ron nodded fervently, and the boys vacated the premises.

Sirius pulled out his wand and activated the DictaQuill. “Gerald Lovegood, interviewing Sirius Black, 24 December 1990,” he said into it. “Gerald, say something so it picks up your voice pattern.”

“That was the funniest thing I think I’ve ever seen,” Gerald said, ostensibly towards the quill, but with his eyes fixed on Sirius.

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Not quite what I was hoping for, but it should do.” He balanced the quill on the parchment and sat back. “Go ahead, whenever you’re ready.”

“Ron, is something wrong?” Draco asked, breaking off his conversation with Luna.

“Not really.”

“Yes, there is,” Draco said with certainty. “You keep looking out the window and sighing. You only do that when something’s bothering you.”

Ron got very interested in his fingernails.

“Come on, Ron, spit it out,” Hermione said.

“You don’t have to be friends with me,” Ron mumbled very fast.

“What?” Harry asked.

“You don’t have to be friends with me,” Ron repeated, still looking down. “Not if you don’t want to.”

The cubs looked at each other, confused. “Why wouldn’t we want to?” Hermione asked finally.

“Because – ” Ron looked up. “You’re famous. Well, maybe not you, Neenie, but you will be. You’re Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy – ”

“That’s not my name.”

“Fine, Draco Black’s sister. And Draco – you’re The Boy Who Disappeared – and Harry – ” Ron sighed. “You’re all special. And famous. And I’m... I’m nobody. I’m just another Weasley. So you don’t have to be my friend.”

“That still doesn’t answer the question,” Harry said. “Why wouldn’t we want to be your friend?”

“You could be friends with anybody,” said Ron, now staring at the wall. “Anybody you want to. We’re – well – poor.” He said it almost defiantly. “And I’m stupid, and I’m not good at anything. So you don’t have to be my friend anymore.”

“Do you not want to be our friend?” Neenie asked.

“No! I mean... of course I want to be your friend – anyone would want to be friends with you – ”

“Ron, you said we could be friends with anybody,” Harry said. “Anybody we want to.”

“You could. You can.”

“All right.” Hermione and Draco, sensing Harry’s trend, began to close in. “We can be friends with anybody we want to be friends with, you said so yourself.” They were surrounding Ron now. “And we want to be friends with you.”

Ron looked up to find he was facing a solid wall of conviction. It was written on three faces and carved in the set of three pairs of folded arms.

Ginny, Luna, and Meghan developed a quiet case of the giggles.

“You... do?”

Three heads nodded solemnly.

Ron looked as if he couldn’t believe his luck.

“You’re my best friend,” Harry said earnestly. “Just because my skin color changed, that didn’t. I hope?”

“No. No, it didn’t change... I’m your best friend? What about Drake – sorry, Draco?”

“He’s my brother,” Harry said, making a face in Draco’s direction. It was returned with interest. “Are you best friends with your brothers?”

“No, but they’re not the same age as me.”

“Doesn’t matter. He’s still not my best friend. You are.” Harry stuck out his hand. “Hi, I’m Harry Potter, nice to meet you.”

Ron grinned and took the offered hand. “Ron Weasley.”

They shook.

“You know, that’s the first time I’ve ever told anyone my real name,” Harry said thoughtfully. “It’s... kind of nice. Not to be hiding.”

“And we never have to hide again,” Meghan said with a blissful sigh.

“You will not hide with changed names,” Luna said dreamily. “But you will find a hiding place in your home away from home. Remember, by the place of your father’s servant, to thank those who gave your mother her gifts.”

Draco looked at her. “Luna, I like you,” he said, shaking his head, “but there are days when you don’t make sense.”

“You’re perfect for each other,” Harry said, and took off running before Draco could catch him.

Life at the Den was back to normal.

(A/N: A “Good Work Award” goes to glm, who pinpointed the area of America the Pack visited in her review of Chapter 34!

Yes, it’s a long chapter, but I don’t think you’ll mind... only three more to go now! “Gifts”, “Unexpected”, and “September 1, 1991” – and they may be coming fairly quickly, so keep checking, and join my Yahoo group if you want to be SURE of getting update notices (growls at ff .

net, but it is free, so what can you expect). Hugs to my wonderful reviewers!)

Chapter 48: Gifts

Danger woke up slowly and luxuriously, allowing the dual blessings of Christmas and freedom to flow through her mind.

Then she opened her eyes.

Draco's head was floating without visible support in midair a few feet away, smiling at her. "Happy Christmas," the head said cheerily.

Danger screamed, waking the rest of the Pack instantly. Sirius took one look, got to his feet, and took a hold of where Draco's shoulders should have been – where they were, Danger realized with a rush of relief, as Sirius pulled something silvery off the boy's body.

"What," she demanded shakily, shooting a mental Don't even start in Remus' direction, "is that?"

"An Invisibility Cloak," Sirius said, shaking it out and looking at it. "Draco, where did you get this?"

"It was under the tree."

"And was it addressed to you?" Remus asked warningly.

Draco looked sheepish. "No," he said quietly. "But a corner of the paper got torn and it looked really neat and I kind of opened it by accident."

"You kind of opened it by accident," Danger repeated. "And then you scared the life out of me. Don't EVER do that again, young man, or you will be spending three weeks doing all the dishes around here. Is that clear?"

Draco nodded quickly. Danger winked at him, and he made a face back. Good, there's obviously no hard feelings.

"So who is it for?" Aletha asked.

“Let me look.” Sirius bent down, searching among the torn wrappings, and Danger watched in fascination as parts of his legs seemed to disappear when the cloak covered them. “Uh-huh, that’s what I thought.”

“Harry?” Remus asked with a knowing smile.

Sirius nodded. “Harry.”

“For me?” Harry stared at the cloak as Sirius placed it in his arms.

“And I bet it’s from Dumbledore,” Remus continued. “Right?”

“Handwriting looks like his. Ah, here’s the note.” Sirius read it out loud. “Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well. A Very Happy Christmas to you.”

“Sounds Dumbledorean,” Aletha said. “James had an Invisibility Cloak?”

“Oh yes.” Sirius grinned. “How else do you think we got into the Slytherin common room all those times?”

Harry was experimenting with making different parts of himself and Hermione disappear. Meghan had vanished completely.

This is all they needed, Danger complained silently. More incentive to make trouble.

Love, they would have got into trouble anyway. The Cloak just might help them not get caught.

Well, all right. But if they do, you’re dealing with it.

I’ll remember that.

So what did you want for Christmas? Danger slid onto Remus’ lap.

Remus wrapped his arms around her and looked down at her warmly. I wanted to see your eyes looking into mine again.

Hmm, eyes. Wonder if we have any of those hanging around...

Further conversation was irrelevant for a time.

The Pack had Christmas dinner with Dumbledore, McGonagall, Hagrid – who took up one of the short ends of the table all by himself – and Amy Freeman.

“A toast,” Remus proposed, holding his glass high. “To old friends and new freedoms.”

“Here, here,” everyone answered.

After dinner, Hagrid announced he had a present for the cubs. “It’s fer all o’ yeh,” he said, displaying the large, domed object, which was covered with a cloth. “Yeh’ll have ter share it. Kin anyone guess?”

The room was quiet. Then, suddenly, from beneath the cloth, a soft noise emerged – who, who, who?

“An owl!” Harry exclaimed as Hagrid whipped the cloth away.

“Oh, it’s beautiful!” Hermione cried in delight at the sight of the large snowy owl, sitting serenely on its perch. “Is it a boy or a girl?”

“She’s a girl,” Hagrid said, giving the cage to Draco. “Now yeh don’ have an excuse not ter write yer sister while yer away at school.”

“That’s right,” Meghan said smugly, sticking her finger into the cage and stroking the owl’s feathers. “Because she’s part mine too. Ow!” She pulled back, looking affronted. “She bit me!”

“Tha’ means she likes ya,” Hagrid said with a grin as the adults chuckled.

Danger was in the kitchen that evening setting up her new table loom – a joint gift from the other women of the Pack – when she heard a faint buzzing sound.

Must be a bug in here. She picked up an old copy of the Daily Prophet and rolled it into a cylinder, eyeing the walls carefully. Ah, there it is.

The beetle was clinging to the wall near the window. It was rather large, hard to miss once you'd noticed it. Danger walked casually over to the cabinet nearest the window, keeping her eyes averted from the thing, then in one quick motion pivoted and struck.

The beetle slid to the floor, looking decidedly worse for wear. Danger scooped it up with the newspaper, opened the window, and tossed it out into the snow. Closing the window, she dusted off her hands and went back to her work.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Draco said nervously the next day.

Aletha hugged him. "You're not going to be sick. You're not allowed. Understand?" Draco smiled weakly at her. "Everything's going to be all right, you know that."

"But what if I mess up and say something really awful?"

"Then you'll be embarrassed. Has to happen sometime."

Harry was fussing with his hair. "Give it up, Harry," Remus advised, coming up behind him. "It never worked with James, it won't work with you."

"But he didn't have a stupid scar on his forehead."

"Don't bother trying to hide it," Sirius said with a sigh. "They're all going to want to see it anyway. Probably want to take pictures of it."

"I don't want them to take pictures of it!"

"Fine, then they won't," Danger said firmly. "We won't let them."

"And even if they do," Aletha added, "the Harry in the photo will know you didn't want that picture taken, and he'll run off. That's one

way magical pictures are easier on the people being photographed than Muggle ones are.”

“Showtime, everyone,” Remus said, looking at his watch. “Let’s go.”

We are lucky we’re not Muggles, Danger commented as the Pack entered the Great Hall. Then there’d be thirty or so of them, instead of just eight.

Isn’t there someone missing? Remus looked over the rather conservatively-clad reporters. Oh, never mind. Every person not here is another person who can’t bother us.

“Thank you for coming, ladies and gentlemen,” he said aloud as the Pack seated themselves at the small table which was waiting for them. A flash or two went off. “A few ground rules before we begin – please be polite and don’t all shout at once. We can’t answer anything if we can’t understand you. We will try to take all your questions, but if the children start to get tired or unhappy we will leave. And that includes if you start badgering them. After today, we will not be giving any more interviews unless we feel like it, so please don’t ask. And if you come to our home or harass us in any way, we will take legal action. Are we quite clear?”

A subdued, affirmative murmur answered him.

“Good. Thank you. Then we’re ready to begin. You, sir, we’ll start with you.” Remus pointed to a small, sandy-haired man with a neat goatee in the front row of chairs.

“James Scriven,” the reporter introduced himself, standing up. “This question is for Mr. Black – what are you going to do now?”

“The same thing I’ve been doing for the last eight years,” Sirius said promptly. “Live my life and enjoy it. The only difference is, now I don’t have to be looking over my shoulder every few seconds.”

The reporter chuckled. “No special celebrations of any kind?”

“We might go on vacation somewhere,” Sirius allowed, “but we haven’t decided yet. It’s the children’s last year at home before Hogwarts, so we want to spend this time together.”

Scriven nodded and sat down. A dark-haired woman popped up.

“Mary Clark,” she said. “Mr. Potter, how does life with your godfather compare to life somewhere else?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “I don’t ever remember living anywhere else.”

“You don’t remember your aunt and uncle’s house, or your parents?”

“I wasn’t even two,” Harry said with a touch of scorn. “But I do know about my parents, and that they loved me very much.”

“And do you like living with your godfather?”

Harry nodded firmly. “Yes, ma’am.”

“All right, thank you.”

“Adam Bartleby.” A heavyset, confident looking man. “Mr. Malfoy – ”

“I’m sorry, who?” Remus said politely.

“Mr. Malfoy. The blond kid with the funny look on his face.”

Draco was scowling at the man.

“That ‘funny look’, as you call it,” Danger said coolly, “is because you’ve just insulted him.”

Bartleby stared. “Insulted him? By using his name?”

“It’s not my name,” Draco said angrily, standing up. “My name is Draco Black. Either call me that or leave me alone. I haven’t been a Malfoy since before I was four years old, and I don’t want to be.”

“All right, then,” Bartleby said, looking a bit bemused. “Thank you, Mr. Black. Sorry to have offended you.”

Draco sat down, slightly flushed. Harry high-fived him under the table.

The questions continued for about an hour and a half. Most of them, predictably, were funneled towards Sirius, Harry, and Draco, but Aletha and Meghan came in for their fair share, and Remus and Danger fielded a few. Most of the ones for Hermione were in the same vein: “So what’s it like living with The Boy Who Lived and The Boy Who Disappeared?”

“Annoying,” was her glib answer. “They leave dirty clothes lying around all the time and they squeeze the toothpaste out of the middle of the tube and they don’t do their chores, so I get stuck with them.” The reporters enjoyed this. One, though, was a little different.

“Miss Granger,” said Adam Bartleby, standing up again. “I understand you’re Muggleborn.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Mrs. Granger-Lupin is your older sister.”

“That’s right.”

“How do you think your parents would feel about you being raised in such an odd kind of a household, mostly with people who aren’t related to you in any way?”

Hermione glanced quickly at Remus. “I don’t know, sir,” she said. “You see, my parents are dead.”

“Yes, I know that, but if they were alive – ”

“If they were alive, I’d be living with them,” Hermione interrupted politely, “so it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Yes, but that’s not the point – ”

Danger rose. “Mr. Bartleby, I think my parents would be proud of how their baby girl turned out,” she said crisply. “I certainly am. Hermione’s a wonderful, loving, intelligent girl and she’s very happy where she is. Are you trying to ask if our family situation would have been in some way unacceptable to my parents? If so, I suggest you ask me, since Hermione never had a chance to know them.”

“All right, Mrs. Granger-Lupin, do you think your parents would have approved of where you’ve taken your life – and your sister?”

“Absolutely. They always told me the most important thing in life was to find true friends, people you could be yourself with. I am more myself today than I ever was, and I owe it all to these seven people around me. One of my greatest regrets is that my parents never got to meet Remus, or Sirius and Aletha, or our children. I can say without fear of being wrong that they would have loved them all.”

“Thank you,” Bartleby said after a short pause.

When the reporters were finally satisfied, the Pack regrouped in the kitchens and allowed the house-elves to fuss over them, getting them each exactly what they wanted to eat.

“I just realized who was missing,” Remus said halfway through lunch. “Rita Skeeter. She was at the trial, with the blonde hair and the bright blue robes. She’s opportunistic to the core, she’d never miss something like this – ”

“Sir?” said Kady the house elf, tugging at Remus’ sleeve. “Rita Skeeter was being in the newspaper this morning, sir. Dobby is seeing it when Dobby is bringing Professor Dumbledore his newspaper, because Professor Dumbledore is laughing at it very hard indeed, and then Dobby is telling us all about it, sir.”

“So why was Rita Skeeter in the paper?” Danger asked, surrendering to the role of straight man. Or woman, as the case might be.

“Rita Skeeter is being in the hospital, ma’am, for having a broken leg and three crushed ribs and a concussion.”

“Ouch,” Sirius said with a wince. “Wonder what hit her.”

“She is saying it was a newspaper,” Kady said with a puzzled look. “But newspapers is not hurting people like that.”

Aletha shrugged. “She’s probably confused from the concussion. Maybe she means a newspaper truck.”

“Who knows,” Danger said. “May I have some more tea, please, Kady?”

The media furor died down somewhat after the interviews were published, and after Adam Bartleby tried staking out the Den and got chased away by a large black dog, which the Pack said they didn’t own and had never seen before.

Gerald reported an incredible rise in sales when the January issue of The Quibbler came out, with its cover photo of the Pack out sledding on the hill near the Den, and the headline “Sirius Black at Home – An Exclusive Interview with the Man Himself and His Family”.

“It’s probably because you know us, so you knew what kinds of questions to ask,” Aletha said one evening at the Den, wincing at a particularly loud thump from overhead.

“IF THE CEILING CAVES IN, YOU’VE ONLY YOURSELVES TO BLAME!” Molly Weasley shouted up the stairs.

“Everyone else is working from the ‘Sirius Black, terrible criminal’ idea,” Remus said. “But you knew us as friends first. So that was helpful.”

“People still point when I go out,” Sirius said with a sigh. “It helped that I got rid of the beard. Now I’m not instantly recognizable, it takes them a moment. But once they figure it out, they still whisper and try to look like they’re not looking, if they’re polite, or they just plain stare if they’re not.”

“Probably going to be that way for a while,” Danger said realistically. “It takes people time to get used to new ideas.”

“I can think of one thing that may help,” said Arthur. “An official guilty ruling on Pettigrew. His trial’s coming up next week, isn’t it?”

Sirius groaned theatrically. “Don’t remind me. I know I have to testify, but I’m not sure I can look at his ugly little face without wanting to strangle him.”

Aletha leaned over and whispered something in his ear, following up with a light kiss. Sirius’ face cleared. “I’ll manage, though,” he said, smiling gratefully at his wife. “It’s what we do best.”

Peter Pettigrew was tried on 24 January by a jury of his peers. The deliberations took only twenty-seven minutes, and the verdict was guilty on all counts.

“The maximum sentence for crimes as heinous as these is the Dementor’s Kiss,” Amelia Bones said, speaking to a packed courtroom. “However, Sirius Black has prepared a statement regarding the sentencing of Peter Pettigrew, which he wishes to present at this time. Mr. Black?”

Sirius stood up. He was wearing conservative robes of a deep burgundy, and his hair was in slight disarray on purpose, since he knew he’d probably run his hands through it anyway without thinking about it. The rest of the Pack was also present, even the cubs, which had been a difficult decision to make, but in the end, the adults had decided it would give everyone a sense of closure. Besides, Harry and Draco had enjoyed watching Wormtail squirm as he had to admit to his crimes. I raised some bloodthirsty boys, didn’t I? I’m sorry, Lily, Narcy, don’t be too hard on me, they are boys after all.

Hermione had watched the proceedings from the shelter of Remus' arm, with a serenity Sirius found disturbingly familiar. Letha's rubbing off on her. I hope Danger's right and her parents would approve of their little girl...

And Meghan had been very quiet, but when Sirius got a look at her face, he was startled by the amount of anger displayed there. His daughter knew very well indeed who was responsible for the circumstances of her first seven years of life.

Sounds like an opening line to me.

"Peter," he said, turning to Aletha and holding out his arms for Meghan, who was still just small enough to be picked up. "This is my daughter, Meghan Lily. I want you to take a good look at her." He paused, and a ripple of laughter went through the court as Meghan stuck out her tongue at Peter, who was staring at Sirius looking confused.

"If my life had gone the way I thought it was going to go, you would already know Meghan," Sirius continued, shifting the girl's weight to his other arm. "You would have been part of her life, perhaps her Uncle Peter or something similar. You would have watched her grow up and become this lovely young lady. But my life didn't go the way I thought it would. None of our lives did. One life, in particular, is different because of you."

Sirius paused to let Harry join him, that line having been the boy's cue. "You remember Harry, Peter." It wasn't a question. "You remember how happy we all were when he was born. I say we because you were happy too. Or at least you acted happy. I can never think of that time without wondering; were you a spy yet? Had you made your big decision? Did you report on our celebrations for Harry's birth to Lord Voldemort?"

Sirius had to stop as the reaction swept the courtroom. When it was quiet again, he went on. "James and Lily Potter, Harry's parents, are dead because of you, Peter. Twelve innocent people, who had never heard of the war or had anything to do with it, are dead at your hand.

That's fourteen lives on your conscience. I wouldn't want to be you. How did you sleep all those years?"

"Badly," Peter squeaked out, causing far more laughter than Meghan had. Sirius waited it out.

"You have fourteen lives on your conscience," he repeated when the court had settled down. "And I have none. I'd like to keep it that way. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I ask that you sentence this man, Peter Pettigrew, to life imprisonment in Azkaban, so that my family and I can get on with our lives."

Sirius didn't flinch as two or three camera flashes went off in his direction. It's a perfect photo-op – Sirius Black, daughter, and godson – which is partly why I set it up this way, might as well pose for the photographs if they're going to take them anyway...

The jury took only five minutes deciding – Peter Pettigrew would spend the rest of his natural life in Azkaban.

I don't believe him. He actually looks happy about it. Sirius shook his head and held Meghan closer as two dementors entered the courtroom to take the rat away.

"No one ever said he was smart," Aletha murmured in his ear.

"Are you reading my mind?"

"No, I'm reading your face. You were brilliant, Sirius." She embraced him and Meghan at the same time. "And now it's really over."

"Nice one, mangy mutt," Danger said with a smile, punching him gently on the shoulder.

"Good work, Padfoot," Remus said quietly. "I think James and Lily would have approved."

"I hope they do," Sirius said. "Somewhere."

The Pack was pulled away from their breakfast on 14 February by an immensely loud motor gunning outside their front door.

“Happy birthday, Sirius!” Hagrid’s voice called across the yard. The grinning gamekeeper was standing beside a gleaming motorcycle.

“And where has this been all this time?” Sirius demanded, running his hand lovingly across the handlebars.

“Here’n’t there,” Hagrid said vaguely. “S’in good condition, though, I checked it out fer ya.”

“Thanks.” Sirius pulled out his wand and pointed it at the seat. “Open in the name of the ignoble and most youthful scion!” he intoned.

The seat popped up, and something shot into the air, growing as it described a beautiful parabolic arc through the chill air. Sirius nonchalantly put his wand away and held out his hands, and the helmet fell into them with a plop.

“And if you only knew how long he had to practice to get that right,” Remus said. “And how many times he dropped it.”

“Oh, you’re a big help to my self-esteem.”

“Your self-esteem doesn’t need any help, trust me.”

“Who wants to go for a ride?” Sirius asked the cubs. The boys and Meghan volunteered immediately, and Neenie added her hand after a moment of hesitancy.

“I’m thinking of a number between one and ten,” Aletha said quickly.

Harry guessed seven, Draco six, Meghan four and Hermione two. “It was eight, Harry goes first,” Aletha said.

“All right!” Harry let Sirius conjure a helmet for him (and a coat, since he’d come outside without his), then climbed onto the back seat of the cycle and allowed himself to be magically affixed there so he wouldn’t fall. As Sirius climbed aboard, Harry felt an odd sensation of déjà vu, as if he’d done this before, a long time ago...

“The funny thing is, you have ridden it before,” Sirius said later when Harry asked. “But it wasn’t me driving it – Lily would never let me take you up. It was Hagrid.”

“He used it to take you to your aunt and uncle’s house,” Remus put in. “But you can’t possibly remember, you were only a baby...”

“It wasn’t really remembering,” Harry said, accepting a piece of the birthday cake, which he’d helped Danger to bake. “It was just a feeling.”

“Well, just a feeling works for me,” Sirius said. “Now what’s this big surprise you three have been so darned secretive about for two weeks?” he asked the other Pack-parents.

“We’re going to get you off the hook with the Ministry permanently,” Danger said, smiling smugly.

“I’m sorry?”

“You’re still an unregistered Animagus,” Aletha pointed out. “And that is still illegal. So we’re going to give you a cover story.”

“We’ve started studying to become Animagi ourselves,” Remus finished. “And when we go and register, you’ll come along, and then we’ll all be legal together. Sound good?”

Sirius nodded. “Sounds excellent.”

“And then when we get to be thirteen, you can teach us,” Harry said.

All four Pack-parents turned to stare at him. "And where did you get that idea?" Sirius said, folding his arms.

"You were thirteen when you started learning," Hermione said reasonably. "So we should be able to start when we're thirteen."

"And because you'll be helping us, we'll be able to do it faster than you did," Draco said. "So we could be Animagi by the time we're fourth years."

"No, you couldn't," Remus said firmly. "Because it's illegal and dangerous, and we're not going to teach you how."

"Then we'll do it ourselves," Harry countered. "The way Padfoot and Prongs did."

"And the worst of it is, they will, too," Sirius said ruefully. "Why does anyone have children?"

"Because you love us?" Meghan suggested.

"That's debatable at the moment." Sirius looked at Aletha and Danger, who were obviously amused by this turn in the conversation. "Help here, ladies?"

"No chance," Aletha said with a smile. "You brought this one on yourself, Sirius."

"Danger?"

"There's always the possibility of Dark wizards targeting them," Danger said thoughtfully. "It might be useful for them to have a skill no one knows about."

"Whose side are you on?" Sirius turned to Remus. "You're my only hope," he said pleadingly.

“That’s sad.” Remus shook his head. “I can’t fault their logic, Sirius. They can and probably will try it by themselves. If we guide them, there’s that much less chance of something going wrong. Maybe it makes me a pushover, but in this case I think they’ve got us beat.”

The cubs grinned at each other.

Sirius threw up his hands. “All right. I concede.”

“Swear to teach us?” Harry asked, seizing the opportunity. “Marauder’s honor?”

“If you swear, Marauder’s honor, not to use your forms for trouble-making,” Remus said sternly. “Do we have a deal?”

Harry looked at Hermione, Draco, and Meghan, then turned back to the man and nodded. “Deal.”

The two alphas shook on their bargain.

February ended and March began, with Ron’s birthday and his Hogwarts letter arriving. The cubs celebrated by spending the entire day out flying and telling each other tall tales of what they would do and be when they got to school. Everyone’s favorite was Ron’s: “I’ll be Head Boy – and Quidditch Captain – and a great prankster – and get a Special Award – and – and – everything!”

The month, which had come in proverbially like a lamb, continued in the same vein, and Remus’ thirty-second birthday dawned clear and fine.

And that means it goes out like me. Remus chuckled to himself as he got dressed. Who in the world would have expected that as my Animagus form. He, Danger, and Aletha had performed the first portion of the spell, which was scrying for one’s form, only a few days before. Aletha had been unsurprised to discover she should eventually be able to turn into a winged horse, and Danger – of all things – would be able to become a wolf.

Maybe we should be the Pride, now, instead of the Pack... we'd still have cubs either way...

He was debating that back and forth with himself when someone knocked on his bedroom door.

"Come in."

It was Neenie, clutching an envelope and looking nervous but very happy. "Happy birthday, Moony," she blurted as soon as she'd shut the door behind her.

"Thank you, Kitten. Is that for me?"

Hermione nodded, but didn't hand him the envelope. "I have to explain first," she said.

"Go ahead, then." Remus sat down on the bed and patted the spot beside him.

"I started thinking at Christmas," Hermione said, climbing up beside him. "When the reporter was so interested in Draco's name, and then asking about me and how I'm not related to anyone except Danger. It made me think. I never knew my dad. You're my dad, really, Moony. And you're a great dad. But nobody else knows about it. And that isn't right. The whole world should know."

"Are you going to tell them?" Remus asked jokingly. "Take out an ad in the Prophet, or owl everyone in the world?"

Neenie shook her head. "Better." She handed him the envelope. "Happy birthday."

And I want you to know, this was not my idea, Danger said in his head. I helped with the execution. Nothing more.

I'm getting worried here.

Don't be. You'll love it. She closed the connection.

Remus opened the envelope and pulled out the parchments within.

He had to read them three times before he understood.

“Kitten,” he said in a whisper. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

Hermione nodded eagerly.

He swept her into a hug. “This is the best birthday present I’ve ever had,” he told her, holding her close. “I love you so very much.”

The best present? Danger asked lazily. Really now?

Let’s not argue, please. Not today. Not after this.

As you like. He could feel the humor rising from her tone. But I’ll get you for it later.

Remus wiped his eyes, which were annoyingly damp, and led Hermione out of the bedroom and down to the kitchen. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced to the rest of the Pack. “I would like to introduce you to a very special young lady.”

Sirius and Aletha, obviously not in on the secret, looked quizzical, as did the other cubs. Danger was smiling.

“Miss Hermione Jane Granger-Lupin.”

It took a moment before anyone got it.

“Granger-Lupin?” Sirius asked finally, just as Harry made a small noise of understanding and Aletha’s face lit up in comprehension.

“She’s changed her name,” Danger announced, beaming. “Legally. It was her own idea.”

“And a wonderful one, I think,” Aletha said happily, hugging the girl.

“Now we’re all Marauders,” Meghan announced. “All Potters, Blacks, and Lupins.”

“And you know what that means,” Remus said, grinning as the realization hit him.

“What?” everyone asked, not quite in unison, but it was close.

“Think of Severus Snape’s face when he gets a look at his class roster.”

The Pack didn’t stop laughing at this image for nearly ten minutes.
(A/N: Did you spot Andy and Let at the trial? The Weasleys did!

Yes, that was a prophecy Luna made last chapter. More about that next chapter.

Yes, we’re down to two... and the next one is called “Unexpected”... yes, you should be a little bit worried. But only a little bit. It’s all (or almost all) going to be good... and there’s going to be Snape! And then there’s “September 1, 1991”, and the last line that I’ve been planning for AGES, and then YES, THERE WILL BE A SEQUEL. So hugs to everyone, and I’m going to go do the dishes now...)

Chapter 49: Unexpected

March, as predicted, went out like a lion, and April dawned wet and stormy. Fred and George Weasley, wanting to celebrate their 13th birthday, sent Ron a letter which exploded and showered red ink all over him and his room. Molly Weasley responded in her trademark style – via Howler.

“ – FRIGHTENED ME OUT OF MY WITS, I THOUGHT HE'D BEEN MURDERED, DRIPPING WITH RED THAT WAY, AND IT TOOK ME THREE HOURS TO GET IT ALL OFF THE WALLS – ”

The twins immediately wrote Ron a very handsome apology note.

“The twins never apologize,” Ron said in confusion, handing Harry the note. “Ever. Can I borrow Hedwig?” The owl had finally been named by Remus after the cubs had fought over names for a month.

“What for?”

“To ask them if they've gone out of their minds.”

“I'll save you some time,” Hermione said. “They don't have minds.”

“They have to have minds,” Draco objected. “They couldn't come up with as good of pranks as they do if they didn't have minds.”

“Fine, they have minds,” Harry said. “They're just not sane. Can we all agree on that?”

Nods all around. The twins were officially insane.
5 April, 1991

Dear Fred and George,

Why'd you apologize?

Ron
6 April, 1991

Dear Ronniekins,

Because we felt like it.

Gred and Forge
7 April, 1991

Dear annoying brothers,

Why did you feel like it?

Ron

P.S. If you call me Ronniekins again, I'll hurt you.
8 April, 1991

Dear darling little brother,

We never explain ourselves – you should know that by now.

The Annoying Ones

P.S. You, hurt us? Feel free to try.
9 April, 1991

Dear idiots,

You told me once never to apologize for anything. And you also once discussed throwing fireworks around in Snape's class. Should I tell Mum about that, or not?

Ron

P.S. I'm trying.
10 April, 1991

Dear Ron,

We're touched. You're growing up. How can we tell? You're blackmailing us.

The Idiots

P.S. Mum threatened to stop our pocket money if we didn't apologize. On 30 April, Arthur Weasley Flooed home instead of Apparating.

"Is something wrong?" Molly asked him, taking his cloak. "You look troubled..."

"Not exactly," Arthur said in a shaky voice. "Molly, I've just spoken with Amelia Bones. Apparently she didn't want to get my hopes up until everything was finalized. But it seems the Ministry wants to show its appreciation for people who help to catch criminals – and Ron and Ginny's role in catching Pettigrew makes our family qualified for a reward."

"Reward?" Molly repeated in surprise.

"A monetary reward," Arthur elaborated.

"Well, we can certainly use it," Molly said frankly. "How much?"

"You should sit down first..."

"Don't give me that, Arthur, if I can deal with learning our neighbor is Sirius Black I can deal with anything. How much?"

Arthur swallowed. "Ten thousand Galleons."

Molly sat down.

30 April, by coincidence, was also the date of the official Ministry apology to Sirius Black for his unjust imprisonment. There had been rumors of monetary compensation to be paid to him, but these never materialized. The rumors ranged from the possible to the absurd, but one of the most prevalent hinted at a thousand Galleons for every year of his life touched by the scandal.

Sirius consented to be reinterviewed in the wake of the apology, and when the inevitable questions about money came up, he told the absolute truth – “I told the Ministry I didn’t want their money. I have plenty of my own, and if I don’t I’d rather work for it than get handouts for something that I wish had never happened in the first place.”

“But I notice you’re not above making them pay out to someone else,” Remus said later at the Den.

“The Weasleys need it, we don’t. And they’ll never know. Now they can afford to get Ron his own wand, Harry was telling me they were going to give him Charlie’s, now that Charlie’s been accepted as intern at that Romanian dragon colony and has a salary of his own...” Aletha took the cubs to Diagon Alley in mid-May to buy some supplies she needed at the Apothecary. “Don’t touch anything,” she instructed them. “Look only. Understand?”

“Yes ma’am,” four voices chorused respectfully.

Hermione stared wistfully at the shelves of advanced manuals on potion-brewing, while Meghan made a beeline for the potted herbs and Draco took a closer look at some of the sample potions on display in the window. Harry, left to his own devices, became aware of a faint noise. It almost sounded like someone crying...

He wandered through the store, concentrating on not concentrating on it (if that made any sense, he thought), just letting his feet take him where they wanted him to go...

They took him to a large bin in the back of the store. It was labeled “CAUTION: Live Animals”, and the crying seemed to be coming from inside it.

Harry squatted down beside it and listened carefully.

“Too crowded in here...”

“I’m hungry...”

“I miss you, my heart’s egg...”

Harry gasped. The last voice had been one he knew. “Siss? Is that you?”

“Harry?” The snake sounded aghast. “Harry, how did you find me?”

“It was just chance, I didn’t know you were here – was that you I heard crying?”

“Yes, it may have been... I was so sad when you had to go away, and you were away so long... and now we are here and we do not know why, and I was very lonely and frightened...”

“I’m here now,” Harry said, prying at the lid to the bin. “Just hold on another minute...”

The lid popped off. The snakes within were in such constant motion that the bin looked as if it were filled with boiling green water, but now every unblinking eye was fixed on Harry, and every hissing word was about him.

“A human who speaks our language...”

“My mother told me of such things, but I never thought to see one...”

“My cousin served one who could speak to snakes, and brought him many tales of what other humans did in their living places, and got many good meals as a reward...”

“Harry!” Siss’ head emerged at the far edge of the bin. Harry picked her up quickly.

“When did you eat last?” he asked, feeling how limp she was in his hands and noticing the unnatural dullness of her scales.

“I do not remember. It was too long ago. Oh, my human eggling, I thought I would never see you again...” Siss coiled around his hand, her voice breaking again in her joy.

Harry bent down to pick up the lid of the bin. “I’m going to take you home,” he said. “You can stay with me as long as you want to.”

“What about us?” another snake protested.

“Sorry,” Harry said regretfully, “but I can’t take you all, and I’d get in trouble if I let you go. I might be able to get you fed, though. I’ll try.”

“All right. Thank you.”

Harry snapped the lid back on the bin and went up to the counter.

“I thought I told you not to touch anything,” Aletha began warningly.

“I’ll pay for her myself,” Harry said quickly. “And I’ll take care of her and she won’t ever go anywhere she shouldn’t.”

“She.” Aletha looked musingly at the snake. “A friend of yours?”

“From when we lived in London,” Harry said.

“The one you arranged the prank with?”

Harry nodded.

“It comes out of your pocket money,” Aletha warned.

“Fine.”

“How much is the snake?” she asked the wizard behind the counter.

“You only want one? We usually sell them by weight, for potion supplies... shall we say two Sickles?”

“That seems fair. Harry?”

Harry fumbled in his pocket and found two silver coins. “Thank you,” he said, passing them over.

“Harry?” the wizard asked, looking at him again. “Not Harry Potter?”

“Yes, sir.” Inwardly, Harry sighed. The dialogue had been repeated almost everywhere he went for the last four months.

Well, before then too, but before then I was saying no...

“Well, I’m pleased to meet you,” the wizard was saying. “Happy to have been of service, Mr. Potter, just delighted.”

“Thank you, sir.” Harry beat a hasty retreat before the man could get any more effusive.

Maybe coming out of hiding wasn’t so great after all.

Then he remembered.

“... seeing who you are, I might be able to knock a few Sickles off the price for you...” The wizard and Aletha both looked up as Harry returned.

“Sir, the snakes are hungry,” he said. “The ones in the bin. I know they’re only for potions supplies, but they’d be healthier if they got something to eat.”

The wizard nodded thoughtfully. “I did have a complainer in here the other day,” he said. “Hogwarts Potions Master, he was, and annoyed because a couple in his batch were dead when he got them home, and the other ones had started eating them, and then of course he didn’t have enough for his potion... but how do you know they’re hungry?”

Aletha gave Harry a warning look. Harry shot her back the “I’m-not-stupid” one.

“I like snakes, sir,” he said. “I can tell if they’re happy or not, and sometimes why, and the ones in the bin look hungry. This one – see how her scales are all dull? That means she hasn’t eaten in too long.”

“Well, I’ll certainly look into that – can’t have dissatisfied customers, can I now?” The wizard chuckled. “Thank you, Mr. Potter, always a pleasure.”

“Go get her a mouse or something at the Magical Menagerie,” Aletha said, handing Harry three Sickles. “Take the others with you and wait for me there.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Where is your nest now?” Siss asked once they were away from the counter.

“In the country – and I have a new friend, his name is Ron, I think you’ll like him...”

“I can smell your nest-mates,” the snake said, winding up his arm. “They are nearby.”

Harry grinned. “Do me a favor?”

“Anything, heart’s eggling. You know that.”

Draco yelped very satisfyingly when Siss slithered onto his neck. His glare warned Harry to beware of something cold and squishy in his bed that night.

“You’re a Parselmouth?” Ron said in stunned tones. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Harry shrugged. “It never came up.”

“So does that mean you have to be a Slytherin?”

“It had better not. I don’t want to be a Slytherin. I’d be miserable there. Did you know their dorms are under the lake?”

Ron shivered. “Must be cold at night.”

“So Hedwig has to be my owl, or Hermione’s,” Draco said. “Because of the one-pet rule.”

“Will they even let you bring a snake?” Hermione worried. “It’s not on the list.”

“Neither is a rat, and Percy had one for four years,” Ron pointed out. “As long as it doesn’t bite anyone, it should be all right.”

“She’s not going to bite anything except her dinner,” Harry said fondly. “Are you, Siss?”

“Am I what?”

“Going to bite people.”

“Why would I do that? It would get you in trouble, and it wouldn’t help me any. People are too big to eat.”

“Just so you know, that’s incredibly creepy,” Ron said frankly.

“Do you want to hold her?”

“Who? The snake? Er... all right.” Ron held out his hand, and Siss slithered from Harry’s to his.

“She’s not slimy,” Ron said, stroking her gently with a finger. “She’s kind of soft.”

“I think he likes you,” Harry said.

“I like him,” Siss answered. “He is very warm and smells nice. He will make a good nest-mate for you.”

“I’m glad you approve.”

Vernon Dursley whistled cheerfully as he pulled up in front of his house. Things couldn’t be better. He and Petunia had both found decent paying jobs and been able to keep their flat for the six months the Social Services people demanded, and in February, their family had been reunited. Dudley had been a little skittish around them at first, since his memories of Petunia were vague and he didn’t recall Vernon at all, but when he discovered they’d let him do just about anything he wanted, he warmed right up to them.

And why shouldn’t we spoil our son a little, now that we’ve got him back?

Vernon had been promoted quickly, and his promotion bonuses had enabled the Dursleys to buy a house – in the same town in Surrey where they had once lived, on the same street in fact. It had been sold to them by a family with a son Dudley’s age, who was also going away to Smeltings in the fall, and the boys had hit it off right away.

Be good for Dudley to have a friend at school. We’ll have to go to London soon to get him kitted up... but enough time to think about that later. Tomorrow’s the big day – my son’s going to be eleven...

With these pleasant thoughts in his mind, Vernon Dursley kissed his wife hello and clapped a hand on his son’s shoulder on greeting, getting a grunt in return as Dudley stared at the television. A cartoon was playing, showing a man waving his hands and things floating about.

“Ruddy nonsense,” Vernon grumbled, but without any real rancor. It didn’t matter if Dudley watched such things, after all... he was in no danger of turning out like that freak of a nephew of Petunia’s...

He wondered idly whatever had happened to the boy, and if he’d turned out as unnatural as his good-for-nothing parents...

Dudley went to get the mail the next day. He came bouncing back into the kitchen, grinning. “Look, I’ve got a letter!”

“That’s wonderful, Dudders,” Petunia said, accepting the rest of the mail from her son. “Who’s it from?”

“Don’t know, there’s no return address. And it’s written in green, and the paper’s all funny...”

Vernon and Petunia looked at each other, transfixed with horror, unable to move, unable to stop Dudley from ripping the envelope open and pulling out the letter.

“You have been accepted...” he read aloud. “Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...” He looked at them. “Doesn’t that mean magic?”

“It’s not true,” Vernon said quickly. “It’s not true, Dudley, it’s just a joke. Ha ha ha.” He gave three jerky little laughs.

“That’s right, dear, only a joke,” Petunia backed him up. “Someone’s trying to have you on, maybe it’s those nasty boys from number four, they look like the sort...”

“If it was a joke, you wouldn’t be scared,” Dudley said, eyeing his parents.

“Scared? Us?” Vernon laughed jerkily again. “We’re not scared, boy, we’re just surprised. Surprised you’d think such a stupid thing was real – magic, ha ha ha...”

“We only want what’s best for you, dear,” Petunia said, trying to smooth things over.

The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” Petunia said quickly, hurrying down the hall.

A brown-haired woman stood on the doorstep, wearing a long dress at least ten years out of date. “Mrs. Dursley?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s me.” Petunia felt an urge to slam the door in the woman’s face, but it was broad daylight and something like that would be noticed.

“My name is Nell Perks – may I come in, please?”

“Of... of course.”

“I believe your son, Dudley, has just been accepted to Hogwarts?” the woman said in a carrying tone as soon as the door was shut behind her.

“H-Hogwarts?” Petunia faltered, making frantic shushing motions with her hands. “Please, keep your voice down – I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re – ”

“Is it real?” Dudley shouted, barreling down the hallway. “Is the magic real?”

“Of course it’s real,” the woman said soothingly. “My goodness, you’re a fine-looking young man. I’m with the Ministry of Magic, Muggle Relations Bureau – I’m an Official Muggle-born Witch and Wizard Welcomer – so welcome, Dudley, to a brand new world.” She shook his hand.

Petunia fainted.

A little more than halfway through July, Andromeda wrote the Pack to tell them that Tonks’ N.E.W.T. scores had come back satisfactorily, and that she’d passed her aptitude tests and been accepted as an Auror-trainee.

“Apparently she’s over the moon,” Danger said, reading the letter. “She was afraid she’d failed the stealth test when she tripped over the examiner.”

“Why didn’t she?” Aletha asked.

“The examiner was asleep at the time, so they gave her an automatic pass.”

Everyone chuckled.

“Speaking of sleep, have you noticed that certain people are not sleeping well lately?” Remus asked, shooting a significant look toward the stairs.

“You can’t blame him, Moony, his birthday’s in two days.” Sirius paused, thinking. “Or seven, depending on which one you’re talking about.”

“I meant all three, but any of them will do. I’ve never seen them this on edge.”

“Well, it’ll all be over in two days,” Danger said with relief. “I’m grateful Professor Dumbledore was willing to do that for us.”
On the morning of 26 July, the cubs woke up a bit later than usual.

“I didn’t think I was going to be able to sleep at all last night,” Draco said in surprise. “And it’s 9:30 already...”

Harry ran his tongue around his teeth. “Does anyone else’s mouth taste like orange?” he asked.

Three nods answered him.

“Sleeping Potions,” said Meghan, pouting. “They made us sleep.”

“It’s better than lying awake all night,” Hermione said practically. “Come on, let’s get dressed.”

It was only seven minutes before the cubs clattered down the stairs.

“Happy birthday, Draco,” Remus said, standing near the bottom of the stairs with his hands behind his back. “I have something for you.”

“Did it come?” Draco blurted, bouncing up and down on his feet on his excitement. “Is it here?”

“You mean this?” Remus said quizzically, withdrawing his left hand from behind his back. It held a parchment envelope, addressed in green ink.

“Yes, that!” Draco glared at his Pack-father. “You know what I mean, Moony. Gimme – please,” he added quickly.

“Oh, but it’s not for you,” Remus said, looking leisurely at the superscription.

“What?” Draco looked astonished.

“No, this is addressed to a Miss H. Granger-Lupin.”

Hermione squealed happily. Remus tossed the letter to her. “And I have one here for a Mr. H. Potter,” he said, bringing his other hand out from behind his back. “Catch, Harry.”

Harry had to press his lips hard together so as not to laugh as he caught his long-awaited letter and looked at Draco. His brother seemed like he was about to cry.

“You are a horrible mean man, Remus Lupin,” Danger said from behind the cubs. “Here, Draco, I have it. They all came together.”

“I love you, Danger,” Draco said, grinning all over his face as he accepted the precious letter, with its “Mr. D. Black” written in emerald-green ink. “And I don’t love you, Moony,” he added with a scowl over his shoulder.

“You have to learn to take it if you’re going to dish it out, little fox,” Remus pointed out.

Draco growled lightly. “Do not.”

“Do too.”

“Do not.”

“Do too.”

“Do not.”

“As scintillating as this conversation is, it’s not getting that letter opened,” Danger pointed out ever so politely.

“A silver potion, used for scrying,” Severus Snape repeated, interested in spite of himself. “And you wish to know...”

“If exposure to it could cause a person to become in some manner clairvoyant,” Aletha Freeman-Black said. “And if so, what type of exposure would do so.”

Severus reached for one of his reference books, not even bothering to look. Freeman-Black looked fascinated. “Does this look familiar?” he said after a moment, handing the book to her, open at a certain page.

“Yes, I think that’s the one. I know Anita used bay leaves, and this includes them, and I remember it having that blue tinge when she brewed it.”

“The Sibyl’s Mirror,” Severus said, accepting the book back from her. “Rather intricate, and time consuming if made properly, but it gives a far clearer picture than many other scrying media, and has even been known to facilitate the extremely difficult business of scrying through time. But as to your question...” He studied the page, frowning in thought. “The active ingredients break down when exposed to acid such as the human stomach contains, so drinking it would be pointless. And the non-toxic rating means that casual contact with skin, such as would be caused by a spill, would not have an effect.”

Freeman-Black rubbed her left elbow, thinking. “What if it somehow got into a cut, or passed the skin in some other way?”

“That... might well do it,” Severus said, struck by the notion. “Yes. The usual bodily defenses are down, so the potion would take effect on the water-based human blood – I do believe that might be an answer. If the potion was in some manner inserted directly into the bloodstream.”

“Like a shot,” Freeman-Black said. When Severus looked blank, she elaborated. “Muggle doctors use hollow needles to place medicines directly into a patient’s blood. It’s very effective. Thank you, Professor, you’ve done me a great favor.”

“You are welcome,” Severus said almost automatically, still a bit horrified by the image Freeman-Black had presented. Needles. In medicine. I am so glad I am not a Muggle.

Freeman-Black was just at the door when someone knocked on it.

“Enter,” Severus called out, and the door opened to reveal –

“Sirius!” Freeman-Black embraced her husband. “What are you doing here?”

“Business,” the man said, dropping a kiss on her cheek. “See you at home?”

“Of course.” Freeman-Black shut the door behind her.

“I have no business with you, Black,” Severus said, letting his tone enter the wide and endlessly fascinating realm of sneer.

“Maybe you don’t. But I have business with you. May I sit down?”

“No, you may not.” Severus felt a surge of glee at making Black stand in front of his desk like a naughty schoolboy. To add to the image, he folded his hands and put on his most professorial look.

“All right, I’ll stand.” Black looked nervous, Severus noted, enjoying himself more and more. “I wished to speak with you about our school days, and some of the things that passed between us then.”

He’s reverting to pure-blood formality – how interesting. He must be very nervous indeed. “What sort of things?”

“The things James and I did to you.” Black was looking around the room, anywhere but at Severus.

“The things you and James Potter did to me,” Severus repeated, allowing himself a small smirk at Black’s obvious discomfiture. “Oh, perhaps you mean your constant crusade to humiliate me in public and make me lose points for my house and garner detentions for myself. Rest assured, Black, I haven’t forgotten.” And your precious children are coming to Hogwarts... easy prey, and quite legal, if they are anything like their parents...

“I’m sure you haven’t.” Black tore his gaze away from one of the specimens on the shelves lining the room and met Severus’ eyes for the first time since he’d entered the room. “We were very much in the wrong when we did that. And I’m sorry.”

The words fell into a dead silence.
He may never move again.

Sirius held himself very firmly in check. I am not going to laugh. It would ruin everything I came here to do.

I came here to close the book on my past, or at least to try. I finished with Wormtail, now I’m doing my best to finish with Snape.

Of course, Wormtail was in the wrong, so it was up to me to forgive him. I’m in the wrong here, so there’s only so much I can do...

Snape began, harshly, to laugh. It echoed in the stone-walled room. “You. Sorry,” he said between bouts of horrible, constricted laughter. “You must teach me sometime how you do that, how you look so sincere. You almost had me convinced, Black. For one moment, I

believed you.” He continued laughing, sounding as if he hadn’t done so for years.

If ever.

That’s it. There’s nothing more I can do here.

“I wish you would,” Sirius said with a trace of regret. “I do mean it.” He headed for the door, Snape’s jarring laugh following him.

“You mean it,” the other man was repeating. “You mean it!”

The door cut off the noise from within the office. Sirius leaned against it and sighed.

I tried. I had no idea what was going to happen, but I tried.

Good luck, cubs. You’re going to need it.
Severus sank back into his chair, weak with laughter.

I almost believed him. For one second, I almost believed he might actually be sorry.

But that is impossible. He began calming himself, breathing deeply, restoring his usual serenity. Sirius Black, admit a fault, much less apologize for it? The sun would sooner rise in the west. So what gain can he expect from apologizing to me?

Of course – his children enter Hogwarts this fall – I thought of them myself, earlier. He hopes to placate me and make their road easier. But I refuse to play his game. I will not be bought off with his false apologies. I will have blood for blood, humiliation for humiliation, and I will enjoy it.

With a loud crack, a house-elf materialized in his office. “What do you want?” he snapped at it.

“Professor Dumbledore is sending you the list of students for the new year, Professor Snape, since it is being the beginning of August and the teachers is needing to prepare for their new students.”

“Yes, yes, give it here and get out,” Snape said, taking the scroll impatiently from the creature.

He unrolled it and began to read. Abbott, Black – no surprise, I knew about him – Bones, Boot, Brown, Bulstrode...

He almost choked when he got to the G's. Granger-Lupin? Oh, glorious. A Black and a Lupin, in the same class. And with Harry Potter, no less. He snarled silently. The Marauders live again.

Another familiar, and highly unwelcome, name caught his eye. And another Weasley. I've seen the mother, built for babies, so it's no real surprise...

His mind chose this moment to present him with a scene from Black's parody of a trial. Minerva McGonagall walking out onto the floor, being trailed by three children, two of them red-haired, the infamous Weasley red...

The younger brother of some of the most outrageous troublemakers I have ever known – and the children of the others – friends, allies in rule-breaking...

Getting drunk tonight was sounding more appetizing by the minute.
(A/N: And if you want to see it, don't despair – “Snape's Wild Night”, coming soon to a computer near you!

FAQs: Probably the last batch for this story!

What is Remus' Animagus form? It has cubs, it lives in a pride instead of a pack... there's an enormous hint in Chapter 35 with the bit about the cat at the bookstore... can you figure it out now?

Why was Peter happy at the trial? Because he wasn't getting the Dementor's Kiss, of course! He doesn't have a death wish, after all.

What is Remus and Hermione's legal standing to one another? Ok, so no one asked this exactly, but it sums up all the questions and assumptions I did get. Remus is Hermione's guardian – in the Muggle world only. He can't be her guardian in the magical world because there are laws against werewolves being legal guardians of children. What Hermione did for Remus' birthday changes only her name, not her legal standing with him. And there aren't any clear precedents in magical law about situations such as this... so stay tuned!

OK, last chapter, coming up: "September 1, 1991, London". Who can spot the parallelism? And who's both happy and sad about the ending? And who wants to see Harry have a magical accident involving Hermione's hair? Stay tuned!)

Chapter 50: September 1, 1991, London

On 3 August, the fireplace in the Leaky Cauldron got quite a lot of use, as five Weasleys (Molly, Percy, Fred, George, and Ron) and eight Marauders Flooded into it one after another.

Hermione was almost jumping out of her skin with impatience to get to the bookstore, while Draco wanted to see himself in Hogwarts robes at long last. Ron was interested in Quality Quidditch Supplies and the latest broomstick models, even if he couldn't have his own broom at school until next year, and the twins, of course, were afire with enthusiasm to visit Gambol and Japes now that they had what Fred called "some real pocket money".

Harry was looking forward to something a bit different.

"Your mother and father knew this day might come," Padfoot had told him the night before. "One of the last things they did before they went into hiding was leave you a letter in their Gringotts vault." He smiled a bit wryly. "It was James' idea to bury it under some of the money. I think he was hoping you'd never have to dig deep enough to find it."

Now, waiting for whichever adult was at the front of the group to open the archway to Diagon Alley, Harry pulled his Pack-pendant chain from his shirt and looked again at the four small medallions.

The first one had a carving of a stag on one side and a tiger on the other – Harry traced the stag's outline reverently with his finger. The second one showed a male lion and a wolf side by side, and a large dog and a winged horse on the reverse. The third, on one side, had a dragon and a cat, and on the other, a bird surrounded by things Moony said were flames, which made it a phoenix, and another bird no one could identify, though Harry thought it looked a bit like a crow. The last one had three pictures on one side – a cat, a fox, and a doe – and nothing on the other.

Everyone's pendants were a little different – the first pendant was very different for everyone except Hermione and Danger, who both had a book and a rose –

Ron waved his hand in front of Harry's eyes. "Hello, anyone home? Come on, they're leaving without us!"

"Hagrid!" Harry called as they entered Gringotts. He sped off to greet the Hogwarts gamekeeper, who had just emerged from the door leading to the vaults, looking rather green.

"Hullo, Harry," Hagrid said a bit weakly. "Blimey, I hate them carts. All righ', Sirius?"

"All right, thanks. What brings you to Gringotts today?"

"Oh, I can't tell yeh that. Very secret. Hogwarts business." Hagrid patted his pocket confidently. "Dumbledore's trusted me with it."

"No one better," Sirius said with a smile. "Come on, Harry, we've got business of our own. Tom's not too busy now if you need a pick-me-up, Hagrid," he added quietly.

Nearly an hour later, Sirius held a tearful Harry in one of the private parlors in the Leaky Cauldron, to which Tom had kindly escorted them upon seeing the look on Harry's face after he'd read the letter the first time.

"Better now?" Sirius asked quietly.

Harry sniffled. "Some," he said into Sirius' robes. "Tell me again?"

"They loved you more than anything," Sirius recited. "More than your dad loved flying, more than your mum loved reading, more than either of them loved life itself they loved you."

Harry emitted a deep, shaky sigh and wiped his eyes with Sirius' handkerchief. Siss poked her head out of his shirt and (Sirius assumed) said something to him, since Harry answered in a sibilant hiss, paused a moment, then gave a small smile. "I think I'm ready now," he said, standing up. "Thanks, Padfoot."

"Anytime, Greeneyes." Sirius scent-touched his godson, and received one in return.

Because I love you just that much.

And that's the highest compliment possible to James and Lily.

" – looked a little like a rabbit," Draco was saying as Harry and Sirius rejoined the main group, who were standing outside Flourish and Blotts. "And he would not leave me alone – he kept asking me questions about what House I wanted to be in, and did I play Quidditch, and on and on, and finally he got offended because I was ignoring him, and he said, 'Honestly, were you raised by wolves?' And I said, 'Yes,' and by the time he recovered I was already gone."

"Don't go in there," Aletha said over the laughter, holding out her hand to bar Sirius and Harry from entering the bookshop. "Gilderoy Lockhart's holding a book signing, and the last thing either of you needs is to have your picture taken with him."

"We've got all his books on our lists this year," Fred Weasley said. "The new teacher must be a fan – bet it's a witch."

"Mum fancies him," George added, grinning. "Thinks he's so handsome and special and all."

"That's probably what's taking her so long," Ron said in tones of disgust. "Getting all of ours signed."

Molly Weasley emerged from the bookstore, Percy beside her, both of them carrying teetering piles of books. "Here, Fred, George, these are yours," she said, shoving the books into the twins' arms. "Ron, Percy has yours."

Remus was right behind her, also with a stack of books, which he handed to Draco. Danger gave Harry his, and Hermione was carrying her own and beaming. "He thinks I'm pretty," she said in a voice which reminded Harry a bit of Luna.

"Who?" Harry asked, rearranging his books so they didn't squash Siss.

“Gilderoy Lockhart,” Hermione said, her eyes half-closed and a rather silly smile on her face. “He called me a pretty young lady and asked if I wanted my books signed ‘With Love’.”

Draco caught Harry’s eye and twirled his finger next to his temple. Ron made a “someone-get-me-a-basin” face.

“Last stop of the day, Ollivander’s,” Remus said quickly before Hermione could notice the boys.

“No, wait, Harry doesn’t have his robes yet – ” Sirius started.

“I’ll take his books,” Danger said, reclaiming the stack. “You two go to Madam Malkin’s, Sirius, and catch us up at Ollivander’s.”

“No, even better,” Molly Weasley said. “I can take all these home for you, so you don’t have to be carrying them about, and you can take Ron with you to get his wand.”

“If it wouldn’t be a problem – ” Aletha said.

“Not at all,” Molly assured them. “I need to get these two home before they destroy something anyway,” she added in a low tone with a glance at Fred and George. “And if they’re carrying books, they won’t have free hands to do it with.”

“I’m not giving these to them,” Hermione said in a disdainful tone, glaring at the twins.

“I’ll take yours, Hermione dear,” Molly said quickly, holding out her arms for them. Danger handed Harry’s to Fred, and Draco dumped his pile in George’s arms.

“Robes, then a wand?” Sirius asked Harry.

Harry grinned. “Sounds like a plan.”

They set off for Madam Malkin’s together.

3 August

Dear Amelia,

The object we were discussing arrived safely at Hogwarts today. Thank you for providing the extra security around Gringotts for the past month. It may have made the difference.

Albus Dumbledore

4 August

Dumbledore –

You're welcome, and thank you, on behalf of my department as well as myself. Now my staff can finally get some sleep (I've had reports of people falling asleep on the job from the overload). After all, if it's not safe at Hogwarts, where is it safe?

A. S. Bones

P.S. Any truth to the rumors you're hiring an adjunct Defense professor this year?

The boys lay in the sun outside the Weasleys' orchard, each ruminating silently on the beauties of the gorgeous things belonging to them – Harry's eleven inches, holly and phoenix feather, Ron's fourteen inches, willow and unicorn tail hair, and Draco's twelve and a half inches, hazel and dragon heartstring.

They could hear, from around the corner of the trees, Hermione's voice, reading something aloud to the other girls from her favorite perch in the fork of an elm. Harry was sure that her eleven and three quarter inches of vine wood, containing one dragon heartstring, was safely tucked into her pocket, ready for anything.

"Do either of you know any spells?" Ron asked lazily.

"We've heard them, but we don't really know them," Draco answered, stroking his wand as Padfoot sometimes did. "Things like

Alohomora and Scourgify that everyone uses day-to-day. How about you?”

“George taught me one – at least he says it’s one, but I think he’s lying. It goes like this:

“Sunshine, daisies, butter mellow,

“Turn my sister’s hair bright yellow.

“But I tried it on Ginny and nothing happened.”

“Speaking of Ginny, where’s she been lately?” Harry asked. “I never see her anymore.”

Ron sighed. “I don’t know what’s wrong with her. She keeps watching you, but every time you start coming anywhere near her, she runs away and hides. And if she has to be around you, she never says anything, just blushes and gets away as soon as she can.”

“Did I offend her somehow?” Harry asked perplexedly.

Draco sighed. “No, Harry, you didn’t offend her. You didn’t do anything – except exist.”

“What?”

“She likes you,” Draco elaborated. “She’s got a crush on you. You’re The Boy Who Lived – get used to it. Girls are going to be all over you.”

Harry shuddered. “Remind me again why we wanted to stop hiding.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Ron said. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“Fine with me,” Harry said heartily. “Let’s talk about... spells. I bet we could make up a better one than that one.”

“Flames and blankets on my bed,” Draco said, sitting up,

“Turn my sister’s hair bright red.”

The other boys laughed. “But you have to have your wand out or it doesn’t work,” Harry said, pulling out his own.

“And besides, that one wouldn’t do anything to Ginny,” Ron pointed out.

“I’ve got one,” Harry said, still laughing.

“Ocean water, sky so true,

“Turn my sister’s hair bright blue.”

A jet of light shot from the end of his wand and into the trees. There were several gasps and a little scream.

“Uh-oh,” Draco said, staring at Harry’s wand.

“WHO DID THIS?” Hermione’s voice screamed.

“What do we do now?” Harry said in a panicked whisper.

Ron gulped. “Run?” he suggested weakly.

They needed every bit of the head start they got to make it to the Den before the absolutely furious and bright-blue-haired Hermione could catch them (Meghan, Ginny, and Luna had been slowed down by laughing). Once there, they were able to hide behind Moony and Danger until Harry managed to get Hermione to understand that it had been an accident, he really hadn’t meant to turn her hair blue, he was really, really sorry, and he was going to turn it back right away.

“No more experimenting,” Moony said sternly, holding out his hand for the boys’ wands. “Hermione, you too. You don’t need these until you leave for school.”

Draco and Hermione wouldn't speak to Harry for a day and a half. Ron was sympathetic. "I told on Fred and George once for hexing Ginny's dolls, and all three of them stopped speaking to me," he said as the two practiced close formation flying. "I guess Ginny thought she could take care of it herself."

By the end of August, everything was made up between the cubs, though Draco was still spending a lot of time with Luna and Hermione with Ginny. "Don't push them," Aletha told Harry. "Remember, they're leaving the girls behind when they go to Hogwarts. Ron's going with you."

Harry nodded. "They're going to wear Hedwig out with all the letters I hear them promising to write," he said. "She's going to be stretched so thin you'll be able to see through her."

Padfoot started snickering. "Owl stretching time," he said mysteriously.

Aletha threw a wad of parchment at his head. "Why is it you can remember things like that, but not to pick your towel up off the bathroom floor?"

Draco and Luna sat in the music room of the Den. It was 4:50 on 31 August. Draco's trunk was packed and ready for the next day's departure. Neither of them knew quite what to say, and Luna was expected home at five.

Luna's hands began to move across the keys, playing an introduction. Then she sang, simply and naturally as Aletha had taught her, asking him to think of her when he was far away...

After eight lines of music, Luna modulated the chords into a finish, although Draco knew that was only a small portion of the song.

I guess that's all she needs to say...

"I'll owl you every week," he said. "I promise."

Luna smiled at him. "I'd like that. Goodbye, Draco."

“Goodbye, Luna.”

It was enough.

Later that night, the Pack gathered in their Den, for the last time for what suddenly seemed like a very long while.

“Something you’ll need to remember,” Aletha said. “Wherever you go, whatever you do.” She hummed a note, then began to sing. The words of the song spoke of courage in troubled times, of walking through a storm without fear.

Sirius joined her, adding a harmony line, as the song promised calm after the storm, even beauty.

Remus and Danger joined in, making it full four-part harmony, and the Pack-parents gave the cubs their word that even though their dreams might be shaken by the troubles of life, if they only kept on, they would never walk alone.

“That’s what Pack means,” Remus said softly into the silence after the song. “None of us are alone. Never forget it.”

After that, it could be something resembling a normal den-night, with stories, jokes, cuddling, and eventually sleep.

Danger awoke halfway through the night, got up, scribbled something down, put it in the pocket of her jeans, and went back to sleep.

I am eight years old and a Black, and I knew this was coming. I am NOT going to cry.

Dadfoot surreptitiously handed her a handkerchief.

All right. Yes, I am.

Meghan howled unabashedly as she watched Harry and Draco bang their trunks down the stairs. “Pearl, we’re only going to school,” Harry said, looking uncomfortable. “We’re not dying.”

“And we’ll owl you every week,” Draco added. “Promise.”

“You’d better,” Meghan said, blowing her nose. “Or I’ll steal Mama Letha’s wand and hex your flute so it makes you sneeze every time you play it.”

“How’ll you do that if you’re here and I’m there, silly Pearl?” Draco teased.

“I’ll Floo there and sneak into your dorm and do it.”

“And she will, too,” Hermione said from the top of the stairs. “Don’t worry, Meghan, I’ll make sure they remember.”

A horn honked out front. “Oh, Remus must be back with the car,” Danger said, hurrying to the front door. “Come on, everyone, let’s get loaded up – ”

Mrs. Weasley didn’t drive, and Mr. Weasley had to work, so Moony would be driving both families to Kings’ Cross. The Weasleys’ old turquoise Ford Anglia didn’t look large enough to hold six Weasleys (Ginny had insisted on coming) and eight Marauders, let alone seven Hogwarts trunks and two owls (Hedwig and Percy Weasley’s Hermes), but Mr. Weasley had been working on the car for a few years and had magically expanded both the trunk and the seats. It was a tad crowded, but everyone fit.

Meghan sat next to Mama Letha all the way there, trying hard not to think of how unfair it was that she didn’t get to go to Hogwarts. She was smart enough. She could keep up. Neenie got to go early. Why not her?

Her frown lasted all the way through the ride and into the station, where Moony greeted an older woman with delight. “Sue!”

“Remus,” she said in reply, shaking his hand. “Just said goodbye to Terry – the security on your platform won’t let me through, Dorothy’s getting him aboard. Are all these yours?”

“No, just the ones without red hair – ”

Introductions were made all around, and a little of Meghan's bad mood was gone by the time the woman left. The group was just approaching the barrier between platforms nine and ten when Danger gasped, grabbed Harry, and pulled him behind a column.

"What – " Dadfoot asked.

"Tell you in a second," Moony said, looking towards the barrier.

A man, woman, and boy stood there, staring at it. The boy had a trolley with what looked like a Hogwarts trunk on it. "Have a good term," the man said brusquely and strode away.

The boy, who was blond and rather heavysset, watched him go. "Mum, why does Dad hate me?" he asked, a trifle plaintively.

"Your father doesn't hate you, Dudley, he's just a little surprised by all this. I am too – it all happened so fast – " The woman kissed the top of the boy's head. "Have a good time at school, dear, and don't forget to write." She turned and walked quickly away, her face wooden.

The boy stared at the barrier as the Weasleys, who had not hung back with the Pack, approached it. Then he stared at Percy as that young man marched towards the barrier – and vanished through it.

"Excuse me," he said shyly to Mrs. Weasley.

"Hello, dear," Meghan heard her say. "First time at Hogwarts?"

"Yes – the thing is, I don't know how – "

"How to get onto the platform? Not to worry, all you have to do is walk straight at the barrier – don't stop and don't be scared you'll crash into it, that's very important – go on, go now before Ron."

The boy visibly marshaled his courage and walked slowly, and probably with his eyes shut, towards the barrier – and went right through.

“Dudley,” Mama Letha said slowly. “Not – ”

“Yes.” Danger emerged from behind the pillar. “Be careful of that boy, you three,” she said to the other cubs, and Meghan’s annoyance was back full-force.

They have to be careful and not me. Because I’m not going.

Not even passing the magical barrier, holding tightly to Mama Letha’s hand, could lift her spirits. She sat down on a discarded crate and pouted.

A thought struck her. What if I sneaked on board? They wouldn’t stop the whole train just for me –

She sighed at her own stupidity. No, they’d just send me home by Floo as soon as I got there. And I’d be in trouble.

A sound drew her attention. It sounded like a croak. She looked around for the source, and finally realized it sounded as if it was beneath her...

A toad sat under her crate, blinking stupidly up at her. “I suppose you belong to someone,” she said. “I should find out who.” She got up, moved the crate, and picked the creature up. Dadfoot was attracting some attention from the other adults on the platform – Meghan skirted that group and walked along, her eyes searching for someone who looked as if they might own a toad. She asked a few people, but the answer was always, “No,” usually with the slightly disdainful tone of an older child to a younger.

Suddenly she saw him. It must be him. Why else would someone be on his hands and knees, peering under luggage trolleys?

“Excuse me,” she said, coming up behind him. The boy yelped and banged his head, trying to get up. Meghan winced. “Sorry. Is this your toad?”

The boy turned a round, sweating face in her direction. "Trevor!" he cried happily, holding out his hands. "Thank you so much – Gran, here he is!" he called to an older witch with a stuffed vulture on her hat. He put the toad carefully in his shirt pocket and held out his hand to Meghan. "I'm Neville. Neville Longbottom."

Meghan squealed in recognition. "You have to meet my family!" She grasped his hand, still outstretched, and dragged him down the platform to where Dadfoot was just getting rid of the last of the people who wanted to talk to him. "Dadfoot, look who I met," she said breathlessly. "It's – "

"You're the Longbottom boy, aren't you?" Dadfoot said before Meghan could finish. "Moony, what was Frank and Alice's boy's name again?"

"Neville, I think – and that's you, isn't it?" Moony asked, holding out his hand to Neville, who was goggling at them.

"You knew my parents?" he blurted.

"Not only that, we've met before," Dadfoot said, shaking Neville's hand in his turn. "But I doubt you'd remember, since you were one day old at the time."

Neville was staring even harder now. "You're Sirius Black," he said in almost a whisper.

"That I am, and this is my wife Aletha, and you've already met Remus Lupin. We all knew your parents during the war."

"So you did," said another voice from behind Meghan and Neville. "Augusta Longbottom, Mr. Black, pleased to meet you. Frank always spoke highly of you and Mr. Lupin, and Miss Freeman, as you were then," she said to Mama Letha. "This must be your daughter."

"Yes, this is our Meghan, and Remus' wife Gertrude, though everyone calls her Danger – and the other children are on the train already, let me call them – HARRY!"

Neville's eyes didn't look like they could get any bigger without falling out of his head. Meghan wanted to laugh, but that was rude. Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Draco spilled off the train and came running over, and were introduced to Mrs. Longbottom and Neville.

"Do you want to sit with us?" Harry asked when they all knew each other's names. "There's still some room in our compartment."

Neville nodded, seemingly unable to speak.

"Let's get your trunk aboard, then," said Moony. "Where is it?"

"You're Sirius Black's daughter," Neville said weakly to Meghan while Dadfoot and Moony hauled his trunk aboard the train. "And Harry Potter's little sister."

"So?"

"And you gave me my toad back."

"Wouldn't anyone?"

"I don't know," Neville said. "I don't know a lot of other kids." He smiled shyly at her. "I guess that's going to change."

"Do you have anyone to write letters to?" Meghan asked, struck by an impulse.

"Not really. Just Gran, and she won't want me to write too often – she'll think I'm slacking off work if I write her letters all the time."

"Would you write to me?"

"You want me to write to you?"

Meghan nodded. "It's Meghan with an H," she said. "Meghan Black. Or you could ask Harry or Draco or Hermione how to spell it. They all know. And I'll write to you – how do you spell your name?"

Neville spelled it out for her. "I never had a pen-pal before," he said, smiling a little bigger now. "Do you like plants?"

"Oh, I love them. I love watching things grow and be beautiful. Do you?"

"I have my own garden at home," Neville said, sounding almost excited. "I grow all kinds of things."

The train whistled. "You'd better get on," Meghan said quickly. "Go on, get on. You can write me about it, and I'll write you about mine. Goodbye!"

"Goodbye!" Neville got quickly aboard the train with one hand, the other clutching Trevor in his shirt pocket. Dadfoot and Moony jumped off at another door. Meghan hurried down the platform until she was near them, Mama Letha, and Mrs. Weasley. Ginny and Danger seemed to have disappeared somewhere...

Ginny was sniffing hard when Danger pulled her aside. "Some advice, Miss Weasley," she said quietly. "Alpha females don't cry in public unless they can't help it."

Ginny froze in mid-gulp. Danger was well aware that the red-haired girl knew Pack speech, knew that an alpha female was almost always the mate of the alpha male. And that she knew very well indeed who the alpha male of the cubs' pack was.

"Just a reminder," Danger said casually, and strolled back towards Remus.

Yes, I'm making trouble. As I've said before, it's what I do best.

Her hand caressed her pocket, and the lines within.

O warrior woman, tell the maid

Of fiery hair that if she wade

In tears so deep for all to see,

An alpha she will never be.

His warty friend returned by Black,

The might-have-been completes the Pack,

And future dangers they will dare

Perhaps without their Danger there...

Danger looked up suddenly to see Harry hanging out the window. "Get back inside that train this instant, Harry James Potter!" she shouted.

"Fine!" Harry yelled, sliding back in and sitting down.

Draco snickered. "Don't even start," Harry warned him.

With a jerk, the train began to move. Everyone waved furiously at the Pack and Mrs. Weasley and Mrs. Longbottom and laughed a bit at Ginny and Meghan, who were chasing the train together. Aletha had traces of tears on her face, Padfoot's smile was a little shaky, Moony looked incredibly proud, Danger was laughing a bit herself, as they waved goodbye...

They all disappeared as the train rounded the corner. Harry felt a great leap of excitement, but there was a little tinge of sadness to it.

He knew what he was going to – but it couldn't be better than what he was leaving behind.

THE END

(for now)

(A/N: For the last time in this fic (sniffle) the songs aren't mine, and if anyone can tell me what "Owl stretching time" refers to, I'll give them a cookie on the Yahoo group!

Yes, speaking of Yahoo group... Gulp. Jocelyn, who writes the wonderful "Harry Potter and the Battle of Wills", just got in trouble for AN's FAR less personal and shorter than mine. So no more reviewer responses for me. HOWEVER: This is why God (or whoever it was) invented Yahoo groups! So the usual responses that would be here are on my Yahoo group – and you don't even have to be a member to read them! Just follow the link on my profile page!

Thank you to all my WONDERFUL reviewers – I never dreamed this story would break 500, much less 1500, which is what I'm thinking I'll have once this chapter (the last chapter – sniffle again) goes up! And remember, Remus' birthday (LwD style) is coming up... wouldn't a wonderful present for him be the first chapter of "Living without Danger"?

Goodbye for now, everyone, and thank you all again! Please don't forget to review and tell me if you liked it or not!)